

Abbas loyalists win top jobs at embattled PLO

Author:

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RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories: The Palestine Liberation Organization named loyalists of Mahmud Abbas to top leadership posts on Monday, with Hussein Al-Sheikh appointed to the organization's executive committee. But no decision was made on naming a new PLO secretary general and chief negotiator with Israel, two key posts held by Saeb Erekat, who died in 2020 after contracting coronavirus.

At the end of the rare two-day meeting of the PLO's central committee, officials said the roles would be filled at a later date.

Ahead of the meeting, analysts had said the 86-year-old Abbas, the PLO's chairman, was seeking to elevate Sheikh, perhaps to position him as a favored successor to take charge as president of the Palestinian Authority.

Mohamed Mustafa, another Abbas supporter who chairs the Palestinian Investment Fund, was selected to take the executive committee seat vacated by Hanan Ashrawi, who resigned in 2020.

Abbas loyalist Rawhi Fattouh was elected chair of the Palestinian National Council – the PLO's parliament in exile.

Analysts have said that support for the PLO, an organization founded in 1964 and charged with leading the battle for statehood against Israel, was growing increasingly unpopular among Palestinian people, amid frustration over its failures to hold open elections for key positions.

Addressing PLO executives on Sunday, Abbas pledged commitment to reform, calling it a "continuous process."

But as the meeting started Sunday demonstrations calling for Abbas's resignation were held in Ramallah and in Gaza, which is ruled by Hamas Islamists.

Hamas is not part of the PLO, and has boycotted the organization over its decision to negotiate with Israel.



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Palestine Central Council holds controversial meeting in Ramallah
World Food Programme launches nutrition campaign in Palestine

[Abduction ordeal of 6-year-old Fawaz Qetaifan prompts pushback against cruelty and lawlessness in war-torn Syria](#)

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DUBAI: Fawaz Qetaifan, a six-year-old Syrian boy who was kidnapped on his way

to school in Daraa four months ago, could be returned to his parents in the coming hours or days after his family raised the ransom to secure his release, sources have told Arab News.

"It seems that the issue will be resolved within the next 48 hours as the money has been raised," Rami Abdulrahman, founder of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told Arab News.

"We do not know who kidnapped him for sure. Kidnappings have been increasing in all areas of Syria."

The abduction of Fawaz captured the world's attention in recent days after graphic video footage surfaced on social media showing the boy, stripped to his underwear, being savagely beaten by his kidnappers.

In the shocking images, the boy can be heard crying: "For Allah's sake stop hitting me."



The boy has not been seen in person since but his story became widely known across Syria. (Supplied)

His cries for mercy touched a nerve with people throughout the Arab world and beyond, especially in Morocco, where this week a desperate struggle to save a five-year-old boy named Rayan Aourram from the bottom of a well ended in

tragedy.

For a moment, Rayan's ordeal placed renewed focus, importance and value on the life of a child, drawing reactions from hundreds of thousands of well-wishers hoping for his survival. Fawaz is now widely seen as "Syria's Rayan," with calls on social media for him to be rescued from a "different type of hole."

Fawaz's ordeal began in November as he walked to school with his sister in their home village of Itmaa in Daraa, southern Syria, and two motorbikes pulled up alongside them. According to witnesses, a female passenger pointed at Fawaz and three men grabbed him before speeding away with their captive. The boy has not been seen in person since but his story became widely known across Syria owing to a series of chilling videos his kidnappers have used to extort ransom money from his family.



The failure of the Syrian authorities to track down the kidnappers means many more children could be at risk of similar ordeals. (AFP)

The abductors contacted Fawaz's parents on WhatsApp before switching to Telegram, which allows the sender to remain untraceable. They initially demanded a ransom of 500 million Syrian pounds (\$200,000) for the safe return of their child but reduced the sum to 400 million. The brutality in the videos sent by the kidnappers has gradually grown worse.

"This will be the state of the boy every day," the kidnappers said in a message accompanying the video of Fawaz being beaten.

Fawaz's uncle told local media that the captors had threatened to torture the child unless the ransom is paid. He added that they said they would cut off one of the boy's fingers each day until the family pays up.

The family reportedly cobbled together much of the ransom by selling their

land and anything else they had of value. The rest was crowdfunded in the past few days by the Qetaifan tribe.

Abdulahkim Al-Qetaifan, a Syrian actor who is from the same tribe, recently posted a video on Facebook in which he talked about the child's plight.

"We thank everyone who has extended their love and aid to help free (Fawaz) from these beasts," he said. "We have decided to collect the money. If we are not able to, we will reach out, but we thank everyone who has offered."

Even if Fawaz is returned safely to his family, the payment of the ransom and the failure of the Syrian authorities to track down the kidnapers means many more children could be at risk of similar ordeals.



A 2020 report titled Daraa: Child Kidnappings Haunt Locals, documented 31 abductions of children between January and August that year. (AFP/File)

Even in a war-torn country so inured to cruelty and lawlessness in recent years, scenes of a young child begging for his life as his adult captors ruthlessly beat him have stirred a collective pushback against the country's seemingly never-ending social decay.

Syria has become one of the most lawless places on earth. Extortion, kidnapping, blood feuds and revenge killings are rampant – and often occur with impunity.

"I worry about my children," Hassan, a resident of Daraa who did not want to give his full name, told Arab News. "I bought a gun and I sleep near it every night.

"I am in a constant state of worry because I cannot accompany my girls to school. I dread to think what these beasts would do to my girls, who are 7 and 12. This country has turned into a lawless land; it is kill or be killed. It is a struggle for safety and survival every day."

A 2020 report by Syrians For Truth and Justice, titled Daraa: Child

Kidnappings Haunt Locals, documented 31 abductions of children between January and August that year. Like Fawaz, many of the victims were taken on their way to school. Others were playing outdoors. As in the case of the abduction of Fawaz, the report mentioned a woman accompanying the kidnapers. It also found that many of the kidnappings happened near government security checkpoints, giving rise to suspicions that the army or security personnel were somehow complicit. Moreover, when families reported the kidnappings to authorities, no action was taken. Some of the children mentioned in the report were rescued but others, as young as 10 years old, are still missing.



Extortion, kidnapping, blood feuds and revenge killings are rampant in Syria – and often occur with impunity. (AFP/File)

“Kidnapping cases have been happening throughout the Syrian war,” Bassam Al-Ahmad, the co-founder and CEO of Syrians For Truth and Justice, told Arab News.

“Daraa has witnessed a lot of cases. Abductors came from all factions, rebels, mercenaries and regime thugs. The kidnappings continued to happen despite the areas falling under Russian and governmental control.”

Under Syrian law, kidnappings are classified as “crimes against freedom and honor.” The penal code states that if a kidnapper abducts a minor, he can be imprisoned for between six months and three years. If a ransom is demanded, the perpetrators can face up to 20 years in jail. If the child is murdered or sexually abused, the death penalty can be imposed.

Such cases rarely reach a courtroom, however. And with multiple armed factions roaming the country – be they pro-government, opposition or extremist elements – it is almost impossible to know who to turn to for help

if a family member is abducted.

A decade of war, a crumbling economy and a complete breakdown in trust have left the population facing living conditions that continue to deteriorate. Food prices have skyrocketed beyond the means of many to pay, and job opportunities are scarce or nonexistent. Against this backdrop, kidnapping for ransom has become a lucrative alternative.

"People have resorted to such ways to make money," Al-Ahmad told Arab News. "We are talking about a country with no laws, a country with hungry people. The abductors coming from all sides is actually the norm.

"While the Syrian government is technically the one responsible for people's safety and implementing the law, it is difficult to expect any results with everything going at the moment."



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[Coalition destroys Houthi ballistic missile launch pad in Yemen](#)

Author:

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RIYADH: A Houthi launch pad for ballistic missiles has been destroyed in Yemen's Al-Jouf province, the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen said on Monday.

(Developing story)

ARAB NEWS

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[Frankly Speaking: Terror threat won't deter British investment expansion in the Middle East, UK trade official says](#)

Sun, 2022-02-06 23:35

DUBAI: Escalating terror attacks by Iran-backed Houthis will not deter British businesses from expanding investment in the Middle East, the UK official responsible for his country's trade with the region told Arab News.

"The GCC, and within that the UAE, have been very popular destinations for both UK exporters and tourists over many years, and we certainly don't see any drop-off in that interest," Simon Penney, UK trade commissioner for the Middle East, said.

"In fact, the Gulf more broadly is the UK's third-largest export market globally, outside of the EU. We are highly confident and have every reason to believe that our position as an exporting nation to the Gulf will improve even further in the years ahead."

He was speaking after a spate of air strikes on the UAE, claimed by backers of Yemen's Houthi militia, in an escalation of the terror campaign that has seen drones and missiles aimed at population centers and civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia.

The UK authorities warned British citizens of an increased threat and urged them to be vigilant, ahead of a visit by Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge, to the UAE this week. But Penney insisted that such threats would not dent the enthusiasm of British business for investment in the region.



Simon Penney, a veteran banker, highlighted the attractions of Saudi Arabia as a trade partner for the UK. (Screen grab from Frankly Speaking video)

"We continue to see a very strong and healthy pipeline of companies doing business here," he said.

"In fact, only last week we had (in Dubai) the Arab Health (trade fair). More than 140 UK companies made the trip out here, which was fantastic to see, not only in light of the events that you highlighted but also off the back of two years of COVID-19."

In a wide-ranging interview on "Frankly Speaking," the series of video conversations with leading policymakers and business people in the region, Penney – who is also the British consul in Dubai – spoke of the "passionate" interest of UK business in many sectors of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic transformation strategy, the imminent prospects for a UK-GCC free trade agreement, and the potential for the Middle East to help compensate for some of the trade forgone by the UK in the post-Brexit world.

Penney, a banker in the Middle East before he took up his current role in 2018, highlighted the attractions of Saudi Arabia as a trade partner for the UK.

"I have to say I'm very passionate about the Kingdom. I've been working there in my various different jobs for more than a decade now and I'm as enthusiastic if not more today than I've ever been about the opportunities that exist in the Kingdom and across the whole of the Kingdom."

"It's not just about Saudi Arabia. We see a lot of activity in Qatar, obviously, with the FIFA World Cup coming up later this year, but also beyond that, in Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait. There really is a lot of interest in this region both ways."

He added: "In fact, only the week before last I had the opportunity to visit NEOM and I was absolutely blown away by the sheer scale of the project, by the ambition of the project, from what can only be described, really, as a blank sheet of paper today."

UK interest in Saudi Arabia was strong across all sectors that have been energized by the Vision 2030 strategy, he said, including healthcare, education, food and drink, and leisure and entertainment.

"And energy, of course. You know, as the Kingdom and the world embarks on this journey of energy transformation toward 'clean growth,' we're seeing increasing interest around 'clean growth' and how we can work with the Kingdom to develop the technologies of the future," Penney said, referring to the goal of simultaneously increasing national income and cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

British companies in the region were looking increasingly at Saudi Arabia rather than other GCC countries.

"In the UAE alone, we have 5,000 UK companies that call the UAE their home but, interestingly, as those companies look increasingly across the region for future business opportunities, it really is clear that Saudi Arabia, in particular, is going to be a major source of opportunity for those businesses," he said.

Penney touched on the reaction in the UK to the recent proposals by the government of Saudi Arabia, which will require multinational companies to have their headquarters in Riyadh in order to conduct official business in the Kingdom.

"I think it's varied. I know a lot of large British businesses that have been working in the Kingdom for quite some time that are actually embracing that because it makes good business sense – it's where the majority of the business that companies are starting to do is, and you know it makes sense to be located in the Kingdom," he said.

"I know other companies have a slightly longer-term watching brief on that. But I think companies will make decisions around what makes commercial sense. Certainly, in a lot of the companies that I've spoken to, based on what I said around the scale of opportunity that Saudi presents, that actually it will make good business sense to do so."

Penney said: "It's not just about Saudi Arabia. We see a lot of activity in Qatar, obviously, with the FIFA World Cup coming up later this year, but also beyond that, in Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait. There really is a lot of interest in this region both ways."



Simon Penney says the GCC is the UK's third-largest export market, outside of the EU, third behind the US and China. (Screen grab from Frankly Speaking video)

As someone who has been closely involved in preparations for a free trade agreement between the UK and the GCC, Penney outlined the next steps of that negotiations process.

"We will be launching negotiations for a GCC free trade agreement in the spring of this year," he said.

"We have just concluded a parliamentary process, which is a uniquely UK process we need to go through before we can launch FTA negotiations. That 14-week consultation closed in mid-January."

He added: "We're now going through a process of assimilating and capturing all the feedback that we received from businesses and stakeholders during that consultation period. We're factoring that into the negotiating strategy and approach the UK will adopt as we commence those FTA negotiations with the GCC."

Since the decision to leave the EU, the UK has been seeking to put in place trade alliances with other major economic blocs as part of the "Global Britain" strategy. However, Penney insisted a UK-GCC agreement was not just a way of compensating for business lost with Europe in the wake of Brexit.

"On the contrary, I think, if anything, it's going to spur business further.

The GCC already is the UK's third-largest export market, outside of the EU, third behind the US and China," he said.

"So, already today the Gulf features very highly in the minds of UK exporters. We're highly confident that by putting in place a free trade agreement, we'll be able to reduce even further some of the barriers and impediments that businesses face in doing business here, which are not unique to the Gulf."

Penney insisted that political uncertainty in the UK, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson is increasingly beleaguered after a series of scandals, would not deter Middle East investors from doing business with the UK.

"We don't see any let-up in investor interest in the UK," he said.

"In fact, since we've left the EU and the referendum in 2016, in particular, we've seen investor interest increase exponentially. Confidence in the UK, I would say, is probably the highest we have seen for a very long time."



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Frankly Speaking: 'Houthi terror attacks will not deter American investments in the region, says Hall Delano Roosevelt
Frankly Speaking: Saudi Arabia can be a leading oil exporter while also fighting climate change, says deputy minister for environment

Survey shows negative attitudes among Turks towards Syrians on the rise

Sun, 2022-02-06 21:25

ANKARA: A new survey published by Turkey's Social Democracy Foundation, known as SODEV, reveals negative feelings toward Syrian refugees in Turkey are on the rise.

Turkey, home to 3.7 million registered refugees from war-torn Syria, the world's largest refugee population, has seen tensions in recent months between locals and Syrians, mostly driven by domestic politics and economic difficulties.

According to the SODEV survey, 66 percent of respondents think Syrians should return to their homeland, with this sentiment higher among voters of opposition parties.

More than half of those voters prefer the repatriation of Syrians, with this rate at about 42 percent among voters of the ruling Justice and Development Party.

Turkish respondents broadly describe Syrians negatively, with 45 percent thinking that Syrian refugees are dangerous people who could pose challenges in the future.

Forty-one percent of respondents consider them as a burden on society, and more than 70 percent of respondents said they were not "clean, trustworthy and polite," while 57 percent believe that Syrians are not hardworking.

Across the country, 55 percent of people preferred not to have a Syrian neighbor, and about 65 percent said they would not marry, or allow their children to marry, a Syrian.

Half of respondents said they would be disturbed if Syrians went to the same school as their children, with 70 percent adding they only communicate with Syrians when they are obliged to.

However, half of the respondents said they have not faced any concrete problems with Syrians in their daily lives, and 77 percent said Syrian refugees had not harmed them in the past five years.

Omar Kadkoy, a migration policy analyst at Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, told Arab News: "In the last 11 years, and especially after 2016, the (Turkish) government prioritized project-based activities to induce and safeguard social cohesion over a strategy of integration."

According to Kadkoy, the majority of Syrians and Turks live in parallel

worlds, and populist politicians exploit this gap and enlarge it with misinformation and hate speech.

The survey also sheds light on the public perception about the ongoing financial help that has been extended to the refugee community in Turkey.

Half of the respondents think the Turkish state should provide humanitarian assistance only to Syrians in urgent need, while 70 percent think that Turkey has already helped Syrians more than enough.

With a debit card practice in force over the past six years, the EU supports one third of the vulnerable refugee population in Turkey to cover their basic needs each month.

So far, Brussels distributed over €4 billion (\$4.579 billion) to NGOs and international aid groups working to improve the situation of refugees in Turkey.

Last year, the EU contributed an additional €3 billion to be used in refugee-focused projects until 2023.

Having repeatedly called on the EU share the burden, Turkey has spent more than €40 billion on refugees.

It has not solely been a story of deprivation, however; Syrians have established more than 10,000 companies in Turkey, some with the knowhow provided by EU-funded projects.

The companies are mostly active in the wholesale, real estate, hospitality, construction and manufacturing sectors.

Although these initiatives help sustain them and avoid being dependent on state aid, 67 percent of respondents are against the opening of Syrian businesses in Turkey, claiming that these companies do not pay taxes or trigger more unemployment in Turkey.

"This is largely driven by refusing (to accept) Syrians as members of the overall community," Kadkoy said.

"Although there are informal businesses and the ones who run (them) are both Turks and Syrians, there are close to 10,000 companies registered with the Turkish chambers whose owners invested 2.1 billion lira (\$154 million) to set up companies across Turkey, and they have created inclusive job opportunities," he added.

However, about half of respondents said they would avoid shopping from a Syrian company; 82 percent of Turks think Syrians do not contribute to the Turkish economy, and 85 percent say they do not add to Turkey's social fabric. Eighty percent think it would be impossible to live with Syrians peacefully.

Respondents expect that crime rates will increase, internal conflicts be exacerbated, that the economy will be weakened, and moral values will be

harmful if Syrians stay longer in Turkey.

Ertan Aksoy, president of SODEV, said Turks consider the increased number of Syrian companies as a sign of permanence.

"They consider the presence of Syrians as a moral obligation, and accept the humanitarian assistance as long as they need it and in a restricted way," he told Arab News.

According to Aksoy, ongoing prejudice against Syrian refugees is mainly motivated by the decreased purchasing power among Turkish citizens due to high inflation rates.

"As long as people struggle to earn a living, they start considering refugees as a scapegoat to blame (for) their daily economic problems," he said.

"In addition to this, the influx of Afghan refugees following the Taliban takeover escalated social frustration," added Aksoy.

"Rather than using the refugee card for domestic consumption and translating it into vote potential, opposition parties are mainly using a responsible rhetoric these days, apart from some breakaway figures."

Experts also note that Turks from a lower socio-economic status are much more tolerant of Syrian refugees, though they have to share the job market with them.

"However, those who benefit from cheap labor of refugees, for instance the owners of factories, take a critical stance ... when we survey them," Aksoy said.

In the meantime, Turkish authorities recently found the bodies of 12 migrants who froze to death near Greece, blaming the tragedy on Greek guards sending them back across the border without shoes and clothes – allegations that were dismissed by Athens as "false propaganda."

According to the official statistics on the readmission of migrants, Turkey took back 2,300 Syrians from the Greek islands as part of the readmission agreement.



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Turkey to open \$45m hospital for Syrian refugees with help from EU
Syrian refugees stranded in Gaza 'prison' for a decade