

Lifeless Lebanon lurches into new turmoil amid worsening economic crises

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BEIRUT: Lebanon continued its freefall into economic turmoil on Friday, with the medical, fuel, and food crises worsening and no political initiative being taken to overcome the deteriorating situation.

The value of the Lebanese pound dropped to record lows, trading at 23,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar on the black market.

This crash was at least partly due to a speech given by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah on Thursday evening, in which he reaffirmed his hostile positions toward Saudi Arabia and called on the Lebanese to have "patience," offering no solutions to their mounting problems.

Fuel prices suddenly shot up on Friday. The price of a 20-liter gasoline canister ranged between 310,800 and 319,600 Lebanese pounds, the price of a diesel canister reached 311,000 pounds, and gas cylinders were selling for 266,000 pounds.

The average price of fuel is now equivalent to half of the minimum wage.

Gas station owners reported an approximately 50 percent "decline in the sale of fuel."

Meanwhile, Economy Minister Amin Salam on Thursday decided to reduce the weight of a bundle of bread while maintaining its current price, which is the highest it has ever reached.

A 1,050-gram bundle is now sold for 9,500 Lebanese pounds.

The Ministry of Economy attributed this to "the high prices of flour, diesel and other materials."

Olivier de Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, issued a statement following a 12-day mission to study poverty in Lebanon, a copy of which Arab News obtained from the UN office in Beirut.

"The Lebanese authorities' destruction of the national currency, political deadlock, and reinforcement of long-standing inequalities have plunged the country into abject poverty," he said in the report.

"Lebanon is not a failed state yet, but it is a failing state, with a government failing its population," he added.

"The destruction of the Lebanese pound has devastated lives and impoverished millions."

De Schutter described the crisis in Lebanon as "manufactured."

He added: "While the population is trying to survive day-to-day, the government wastes precious time evading accountability and scapegoating refugees from the comfort of their offices."

"This outrageous level of inequality is furthered by a tax system that rewards the banking sector, encourages tax evasion and concentrates wealth in the hands of the few. In the meantime, the population is subject to regressive taxes that hit the poorest most."

"This is a human-made disaster that was long in the making."

De Schutter expressed his concern that the "political leadership seems unwilling to see the relationship between tax reform and poverty alleviation and underestimates the benefits of social protection systems for rebuilding the economy, especially in times of crisis."

"Unfortunately, I heard no credible poverty alleviation plan from the government that does not rely on international donors and non-governmental organizations. Dependence on international aid is not sustainable and in fact it weakens state institutions."

The UN expert added: "The question is what political leaders spent the resources on."

"For decades, Lebanon ignored the need for social policies, including strong welfare programmes and public service infrastructure, and instead focused on unproductive sectors like banking, continuously expanding public debt and devoting those resources to debt servicing."

He added: "Lebanon has an opportunity to rethink its economic model. Continuing to incentivize a failed model based on rentierism, inequality, and sectarianism will only sink the population further into destitution."

He warned that the international community would not take Lebanese reforms seriously "until a credible plan is proposed for how to transform the economy, address inequality, ensure tax justice, and prevent further political stalemates," warning that the donor community was running out of patience with the Lebanese government.

"After losing \$240 million to the scam of arbitrary and unfavorable exchange rates, they need to see that the government is serious about transparency and accountability, and a rights-based approach can guide the government's efforts in this process."

De Schutter told Reuters: "Lebanon's officials are living in fantasy land. This does not bode well for the country's future."

Prime Minister Najib Mikati's government, formed in September, is yet to

convene amid an ongoing political dispute.

Meanwhile, the reserve in hard currencies at the Central Bank is shrinking to such an extent that it is no longer possible to support medicines for chronic diseases. This decline in economic capacity comes after the Central Bank lifted support for regular medicines.

The crisis has now affected patients suffering from severe and chronic diseases, especially cancer patients, who lack access to life-saving medicines.

Economist Dr. Louis Hobeika told Arab News: "The state's revenues have vanished. The customs dollar, which is still priced according to the official exchange rate, is no longer logical, and it must be gradually raised, not immediately raised to the exchange rate on the Central Bank's official platform."

He added: "Politicians knew that we were on the verge of such a crisis three years ago, but they did not do anything and waited for solutions from abroad, and this did not happen."

The economist added: "The reserves dried up, and the Central Bank says that it has only \$13 billion, but it could be less."

Hobeika said that the Ministry of Economy's issuance of a new price for fuel coming just two days after another price was issued – which included an increase of 2,000 Lebanese pounds – indicates the extent of the crisis.

After meeting with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Information Minister George Kordahi reiterated on Friday that he does not intend to resign from the government "without guarantees" – a position that Hobeika believes will "worsen Lebanon's economic crisis after its political crisis with the Gulf."

Hobeika added: "We have not yet seen the results of the economic boycott of Lebanon. We now fear for the fate of the Lebanese working in the Gulf, but what if the crisis affects transfers to universities, charities and civil society organizations? What if Gulf Air traffic stops? Won't Lebanon suffocate? Patience will not do any good then."

Despite growing pressures, it appears unlikely that the Lebanese will take to the streets to renew their protests. This popular reluctance to express anger "is way more than mere frustration, it is a loss of purpose," Hobeika said.

"Citizens are stuck in a hellish, vicious cycle."



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'No magic wand' to resolve Lebanon's economic crisis In a country with no electricity, Miss Internet Lebanon is crowned

[Lack of contact from Iran govt 'astonishing': UN nuclear watchdog](#)

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Fri, 2021-11-12 16:27

VIENNA: The head of the UN nuclear watchdog said Friday it was "astonishing" that he has had no contact with the new Iranian government over several important outstanding issues since it took office.

Rafael Grossi, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), had been hoping to visit Iran before the next meeting of the IAEA's Board of Governors starts on November 22 but made clear on Friday that he was

disappointed that no invitation had yet been forthcoming.

Grossi's latest comments come as diplomats prepare for international talks in Vienna to restart later this month on the restoration of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

In parallel with those efforts, the IAEA has been trying to resolve several other issues with Iran, including restrictions on some of its inspections activities imposed earlier this year.

Grossi visited Tehran in September where he clinched a deal over access to surveillance equipment at Iran's nuclear facilities but had hoped to return soon afterwards to have further discussions with the government of ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi, who took office in August.

"I have not had any contact with this government... that has been there for more than five months," Grossi told reporters, adding that the only exceptions had been "technical conversations" with Iran's new atomic energy chief Mohamed Eslami.

"This is astonishing and I am saying it openly because I'm saying it to them," Grossi said.

"There's a long list of things we need to discuss," he said.

Days after Grossi's September visit to Tehran, the IAEA complained that contrary to the agreement struck there it had been denied "indispensable" access to a centrifuge component manufacturing workshop where it needed to service equipment.

Another long-standing issue between the IAEA and Iran relates to questions the agency has about the previous presence of nuclear material at undeclared sites in the country.

The agency has said in numerous reports that Iran's explanations about the material have not been satisfactory.

Discussions on those issues at the Board of Governors meeting could lead to a resolution critical of Iran.

On November 29, just a week after the start of that meeting, diplomats are due to convene for the talks on the 2015 deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA).

Those talks have been suspended since June.

The JCPOA began disintegrating in 2018, when the United States unilaterally pulled out under President Donald Trump and began imposing crippling sanctions on Iran, including a unilateral ban on its oil exports.

In response, Iran began in 2019 disregarding strict curbs on its nuclear activities under the JCPOA.

Trump's successor Joe Biden says he hopes to return to the agreement but progress toward reviving the deal has been slow.



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UK urges Iran to back plan to revive nuclear deal
Iran's Raisi warns West against 'excessive' nuclear demands

[Israeli appeals court upholds ruling to return kidnapped boy to Italy](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2021-11-11 00:32

JERUSALEM: An Israeli court on Thursday upheld a ruling to return to Italy a six-year-old boy, the sole survivor of an Italian cable car disaster who was kidnapped to Israel by his grandfather, Israel's Justice Ministry said. Eitan Biran's maternal grandfather had appealed against a Tel Aviv family

court's decision last month to send the boy back to his paternal aunt in Italy, in a cross-border custody battle.

The child had been living with the aunt since his parents, younger brother and 11 other people died when a gondola plunged to the ground in northern Italy in May.

In September, while visiting Eitan, his maternal grandfather, without the aunt's consent, drove him to Switzerland and chartered a private jet onward to Israel.

The aunt petitioned the family court for his return to Italy. The court found that the grandfather's actions amounted to kidnapping under the Hague Convention on the return of abducted children.

The grandfather appealed against the ruling to a Tel Aviv district court, which the Justice Ministry said upheld the family court's decision.

"We order the minor be returned to Italy within 15 days," the district court said in a ruling released by the ministry. The court stayed implementation of the order for a week to enable the grandfather to appeal to Israel's Supreme Court.

"Although the appellant took the minor away illegally, his misdeeds should not come at his grandson's expense, and the minor should be allowed to meet with his grandfather, even in Italy," the court said.

Lawyers for the grandfather said they will consider an appeal to the Supreme Court, after studying the ruling.



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Israeli grandfather says he saved, not kidnapped, grandson in Italy
Israeli court hears custody fight over cable car survivor, 6

[Libyan political impasse threatens election as global powers meet on crisis](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-11-12 00:28

PARIS: As political wrangling threatens to derail Libya's proposed election, international powers see little choice but to start the vote as planned on Dec. 24 despite the risk of unravelling a year-long peace process.

Despite the lack of any agreement six weeks before the election on rules governing the vote or who can run, major states preparing to meet on Friday believe there is momentum behind the poll, diplomats say.

Western states are preparing to strengthen international backing for the election at a conference in Paris on Friday and want agreement on warning any potential spoilers that they could face sanctions.

Libya's election was set through a U.N.-backed roadmap adopted last year that also established an interim unity government to take over from rival administrations in east and west that had been warring for years.

The peace process is seen as a chance to end the decade of instability and warfare triggered by the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that ousted Muammar Gaddafi and has since drawn in regional powers in a threat to wider Mediterranean stability.

However, with no clear agreement on the legal basis for the election, major factions may reject the vote, and analysts warn that even those who take part may seek to use any ambiguities or disputes to justify subsequent grabs for power.

"A postponement in itself is not less dangerous than maintaining the Dec. 24 date regardless of the risks. It all depends on how things are negotiated," Jalel Harchaoui of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime said. The likely candidacy of Khalifa Haftar, the commander of eastern-based forces who led a destructive assault on Tripoli in 2019-20 and who wields control in swathes of Libya, has angered many in the capital and western regions. They say no vote in areas he holds can be fair.

Some other Libyans, including powerful figures in the east, want to prevent the candidacy of Abdulhamid Dbeibah, who vowed he would not stand for election when he was appointed as interim prime minister in March. His critics accuse him of using state cash for populist policies he can use to win votes.

Other probable candidates include Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of the former dictator, and Aguila Saleh, speaker of a parliament that the election is intended to replace, and who issued a voting law that many Libyans see as self-serving.

Diplomats say they believe an election that includes all major figures is needed and that international monitoring of polls could help to prevent or to reveal fraud or the intimidation, suppression or manipulation of voters.

The most visible obstacle is the dispute over Saleh's voting law, which was issued during a session that several parliament members later said lacked a proper vote or quorum.

Instead of setting both the presidential and parliamentary elections on Dec. 24 as stipulated in the U.N.'s roadmap, it said the parliamentary vote would take place at a later date along with a second round of the presidential vote.

Saleh's law also said candidates already holding office must temporarily step down three months before the election. Both Saleh and Haftar have done so. Dbeibah has not.

Armed factions based in Tripoli have rejected the law. So has the High State Council, a body enshrined in a 2015 political agreement.

However, the state elections commission has already moved forward with the process of registering candidates and issuing voter cards. It has said a first round of the presidential election will take place on Dec. 24 with a second round, and a parliamentary election, within 52 days of that.



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Egyptian foreign minister discusses Libyan elections, Sudan at media

briefingLibyan elections must be held on time, says Egyptian president

At Raqqa ‘roundabout of hell,’ Syrian lovers find new meeting spot

Fri, 2021-11-12 00:19

RAQQA: RAQQA: Only a few years ago, Al-Naim square was the grim stage for Raqqa’s public executions. Today, Nader Al-Hussein sits in its new arched design, waiting for his date to arrive.

“This is the best meeting point for lovers, families and friends,” the 25-year-old says, sitting on one of the rare public benches in the bustling, war-ravaged north Syria city.

“Before, we used to avoid passing near it so that we wouldn’t see blood and horror,” Hussein says.

The Al-Naim (Paradise) traffic circle was anything but heavenly when Daesh reigned over Raqqa, its former de facto Syrian capital, between 2014 and 2017.

Residents dubbed it the “roundabout of hell.”

Extremists flaunted their implementation of Shariah law in the square, carrying out flagellations, crucifixions and even decapitations on those deemed apostates or criminals.

Their marauding morality police made it impossible for lovers to meet, even in private, without risking death.

“I never dared to meet with my girlfriend in person; we used to speak only over the phone, out of fear that we may be stoned as punishment,” Hussein says.

Two years after Daesh was declared defeated in Syria, the revamped square is a far cry from the barren dirt mound that hosted some of the jihadist group’s most repulsive acts.

Arched columns have been built around a new central fountain, replacing the metal fence on whose spikes a Daesh executioner once impaled the heads he had just severed before posing for a picture.

Benches have been placed near elliptical side pools.

At night, multicolored laser lights turn the square into a rare attraction amid the drab and ghostly concrete jumble of the city, four years after Daesh left.

The roundabout is central and ringed by cafes and restaurants, making it a popular spot for families and couples alike.

“Al-Naim square has turned from hell into paradise ... even lovers come here now,” says 24-year-old Manaf, declining to provide his surname and adding that he visited it often.

Around him, children dash between benches while men and women chat and snap photos. Laughter rises from a picnic spot as street vendors selling red heart-shaped balloons mill about.

In a scene unimaginable just four years ago, Mohammad Al-Ali, 37, and his

wife sit side-by-side, looking out for their three children as they play around one of the empty pools.

"We never brought the kids here so that they wouldn't see decapitated heads hanging," he said.

"But today, the square is a space for families and children."

Life is slowly picking up in Raqqa, where leveled buildings and traces of Daesh insignia provide stark reminders of the dark era of jihadist rule.

It was here that Daesh stoned people to death and auctioned off women from the Yazidi minority as slaves.

A few kilometers away from Al-Naim square, another infamous yet smaller roundabout used by Daesh for executions has also regained its bustle, largely owing to its location near a popular market.

For some, however, a shadow still hangs over the place known as "clock-tower square."

"This roundabout reminds us of the tragedy we lived ... it reminds us of death and suffering," says Ahmad Al-Hamad, who was passing the square on his wheelchair on the way to the grocer's.

"We used to see the severing of heads and hands, and executions carried out using swords," he says.

Several of Hamad's own relatives were beheaded in the square.

"We used to be scared of even passing near it," he says.

The situation is similar at the nearby Al-Dallah roundabout, named after a large-scale reproduction of a traditional Arabic coffee pot that adorns its centre.

Also a former Daesh punishing ground, Raqqa residents have since dubbed Al-Dallah as "the workers' square," in reference to the day laborers who usually dot its sidewalks in the hope of being picked up for odd jobs.

Abdel Majid Abdallah, one of the workers, says he could never forget how Daesh used to display prisoners in cages at the roundabout.

"But today it's a place where we come to earn a living," the 35-year-old says.



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Syria's Raqqa still finding the dead, 2 years after Daesh fall 200 corpses found in mass grave in Syria's Raqqa: official