

# Israeli criminalization of Palestinian civil groups condemned

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AMMAN: Condemnation is pouring in from around the world following Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz's decision to declare six Palestinian human rights groups as "organizations of terror."

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued a joint statement calling the Israeli decision a "brazen" attack and a "shocking assault" on human rights.

Al-Haq, the Palestinian chapter of the Geneva-based International Center of Jurists working in Palestine since 1979, issued a statement saying that it was no coincidence that the escalation of punitive measures followed the opening of an International Criminal Court investigation into Israeli's crimes in Palestine.

Al-Haq stated that it would "tirelessly maintain" its efforts to ensure that Israeli perpetrators of mass atrocity crimes were held accountable. The Global Network on the Question of Palestine expressed solidarity with the targeted organizations.

"To Addameer, Al-Haq, Defense for Children International – Palestine, Union of Agricultural Work Committees, Bisan Center for Research and Development, and Union of Palestine Women Committees, we say: "You are not alone. Your cause is our cause, your freedom is our freedom."

Anis Kassem, editor of the Palestine Yearbook of International Law, told Arab News that Israeli accusations against Palestinian human rights groups were part of the policy of the occupiers.

"The Israeli occupiers are not able to accept any criticism to its cruelty."

Diana Buttu, former legal adviser to the Palestinian negotiating team, told Arab News that the Israeli action was part of a decade-long policy by the Israeli government to criminalize any form of Palestinian opposition to its military rule.

"What they are doing is illegal and this is what apartheid regimes do."

Ali Abunimah, executive director of The Electronic Intifada, told Arab News that the primary responsibility lies with the US, EU and Arab regimes who have "coddled and pampered" Israel – no matter how it treats Palestinians.

"Why shouldn't Israel take this egregious step when it knows that it will

suffer no consequences and only receive more rewards from all these complicit actors?" said Abunimah, author of the "Battle for Justice in Palestine."

Sami Abou Shahadeh, a member of the Israeli Knesset, told Arab News that the occupation was the true terror.

Al-Haq, Addameer, and other Palestinian human rights organizations are struggling for justice and against the biggest terror, which is the Israeli occupation.

Nazareth-based lawyer Botrus Mansour told Arab News that it was absurd that Israel had declared organizations that exposed its own illegal human rights violations were terrorist organizations.

"International law and international judicial systems must supersede local government decisions, must investigate the laws of these countries, especially those countries who violate human rights."

Mofid Deak, a former US diplomat, told Arab News that Israel had never wanted an independent professional human rights group in the Palestinian areas with relations with Israeli groups and international connections.

Deak said that that he expected "the US will response more forcefully once they get all the details of this case."

Edo Konrad, editor of +972, a magazine published in Israel-Palestine, told Arab News that Israel has "declared war" against human rights defenders everywhere.

"Israel is shrinking the ability of Palestinians to tell the world about their own brutalization and colonization."

Palestinians are concerned that directors and staff of these reputable organizations might face the same fate as that of detainee Mohammed El-Halabi.

Khalil Al-Halabi from Gaza told Arab News that his son – a humanitarian worker with World Vision – has been in jail since 2016 on unproven charges of diverting humanitarian aid to Hamas.

"My son is still in jail because he refused to accept an Israeli plea offer in which he would admit to a lesser charge and be free."



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## [Lebanese president returns electoral law to parliament](#)

Sat, 2021-10-23 21:12

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun has sent a law amending legislative election rules back to parliament for reconsideration, the presidency said in a statement.

Aoun did not sign the law, to which parliament introduced some amendments. He has requested that these amendments be reconsidered.

Aoun's objection comes after the Free Patriotic Movement bloc raised its opposition to holding elections in March instead of May because it "narrows its margins of action."

During the legislative session of Oct. 19, the bloc also objected to proposals to change the expatriate voting formula by canceling the six allocated seats and allowing expatriates to vote for the electoral lists.

The FPM sought to allocate these six seats in the electoral law, provided that voting for these representatives would take place in the 2022 elections.

Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri called on the parliamentary committees to convene next Tuesday to discuss Aoun's response to the electoral law.

Observers described these developments as a sign of a political struggle for the presidency.

The parliament to be elected in March is expected to pick the new president after Aoun's term ends in October.

In the decree in which he requested a review of the amendments, Aoun said that "shortening the constitutional deadline for the elections could prevent voters from being able to exercise their electoral right due to the natural and climatic factors that often prevail in March, making it impossible for voters to reach their polling stations, not to mention the cost of transportation and the inability to supply polling stations with electricity."

He added: "This could also prevent voters residing outside Lebanon from exercising their political right preserved in the current electoral law by voting for their representatives in the electoral district designated for non-residents."

The president said that the amendments to the law deprive the right to vote from 10,685 citizens, who would reach the age of 21 between Feb. 1 and March 30, 2022.

Zeina Helou, an elections expert, told Arab News: "Aoun is trying to pull strings in order to later accuse the other political parties of preventing him from carrying out the reforms he wanted."

She added: "Aoun and his political team prefer to gain more time to conduct the elections rather than move the date up."

"Freezing the voter lists will deprive new voters who would soon turn 21 from the right to vote, and this may be a reason to appeal before the Constitutional Council."

Helou added that "the FPM fears that Christian voters who live in Greater Beirut will not go to the polling stations in their remote villages and towns in Akkar, in the north, the south, and Baalbek-Hermel, either because of the high prices of gasoline or because of the stormy weather in the mountains in March, and insists on Mega polling centers."

She noted that “this process requires a lot of time to be arranged, but I doubt that the rest of the political parties want these polling stations in the places where voters live because they lose the ability to control their voters and know who they voted for.”

Helou pointed out: “The Shiite duo, Hezbollah and the Amal movement – unlike Aoun and his political team – do not fear the upcoming elections. Hezbollah does not derive its legitimacy from the elections but from its weapons and power.

“Hezbollah is able to obstruct any parliamentary session, just as it is currently obstructing holding cabinet sessions until Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the investigation into the Beirut port blast, is removed. The second Hezbollah feels threatened, it will turn the tables.”

Justifications for disrupting the elections in March may already be in motion, regardless of constitutional reasons that may or may not be taken into account.

Helou told Arab News that FPM head MP Gebran Bassil – who has always wanted to become president – may benefit from the current developments and reap rewards elsewhere.

Although the political parties believe it is still too early to discuss what the upcoming parliamentary elections will bear, Helou said that in 2018, the elections were held amid understanding and settlements between the political parties in power, while in 2022 they will be marked by tug-of-war and alliances.

“The same parties could be re-elected and regain their seats in parliament, and we may see a low voter turnout for lack of convincing alternatives.”

Next Tuesday, parliament is expected to either approve Aoun’s request, which requires the votes of 61 MPs, or appeal it before the Constitutional Council.

Parliament could also introduce some amendments to the law, which requires the votes of half of the quorum plus one; if the quorum is 65 MPs, the law would need 33 votes.



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Aoun hails new phase for Lebanon  
Lebanese President Aoun: We are on the brink of forming a new government

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## [Algeria rejects Western Sahara talks](#)

Author:

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ALGIERS: Algeria on Friday ruled out returning to roundtable talks over Western Sahara, days after the UN appointed a new envoy for the conflict. "We confirm our formal and irreversible rejection of the so-called roundtable format," Algeria's Western Sahara envoy Amar Belani told the APS news agency.

Algiers is seen as the main backer of the Polisario Front, which seeks independence in the disputed territory, mostly controlled by Algeria's arch-rival Morocco.

The International Crisis Group wrote this month that "Rabat considers Western Sahara a regional issue and the Polisario an Algerian proxy", meaning Morocco

wants Algeria at the table in any talks.

But some Polisario officials demand a return to bilateral talks on what they see as “a struggle by a colonized population for national liberation from a colonial power”, the ICG report explained.

The last UN-led peace talks in 2019 involved top officials from Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and the Polisario.

But they were frozen after UN envoy Horst Kohler quit the post in May 2019. He was finally replaced this month by veteran diplomat Staffan de Mistura. The Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of peace mission MINURSO by Oct. 27, and possibly call for new roundtable talks.

But Belani said Algeria had told the council it rejects the “deeply unbalanced” and “counterproductive” format, warning it would thwart De Mistura’s efforts.

He accused Rabat of trying “to evade the characterization of the Western Sahara issue as one of decolonization and to portray it as a regional, artificial conflict”.

Tensions have mounted between Rabat and Algiers since Morocco last year normalized ties with Israel and won US recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony rich in phosphate and Atlantic fisheries.

Algeria, which has long supported the Palestinian cause as well as the Polisario, in August cut diplomatic ties with its rival over “hostile actions,” including alleged spying on its officials – accusations Morocco dismisses.

The standoff also came after the Polisario declared a three-decade cease-fire “null and void” after a Moroccan incursion to break up a blockade of a highway into Mauritania.

Belani urged the UN to treat the issue seriously. “We must recognize that the risks of escalation are serious,” he said. “Peace and stability in the region are at stake.”





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## [Foreign aid lost in Syria exchange rate distortions](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-10-23 00:30

BEIRUT: Syrian President Bashar Assad's government has used distorted exchange rates to divert at least \$100 million in international aid to its coffers in the past two years, according to new research.

The currency manipulation deprives Syrians, most of them impoverished after a decade of war, of much-needed funds. It also allows the Damascus government to circumvent sanctions enforced by Western countries that hold it responsible for most of the war's atrocities.

"Western countries, despite sanctioning Syrian President Bashar Assad, have become one of the regime's largest sources of hard currency," said the report published this week by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a



Washington-based research organization that focuses on international public policy issues.

“Assad does not merely profit from the crisis he has created,” the report added. “He has created a system that rewards him more the worse things get.”

On Friday, the UN acknowledged that exchange rate fluctuations have had “a relative impact” on the effectiveness of some of the UN programs, particularly since the second half of 2019 when the Syrian currency took a nosedive.

Francesco Galtieri, a senior Damascus-based UN official, said his office received the report on Thursday. “We are carefully reviewing it, also to openly discuss it in the coming weeks with our donors, who are as concerned as we are that the impact of the assistance to the people in Syria is maximized,” Galtieri, team leader of the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, said.

The authors of the research published on Wednesday said the amount of aid lost and diverted to Syrian government coffers as a result of the national currency fall is likely to be more than \$100 million over the past two years. The data they used to calculate the amount was limited to UN procurement and does not include aid delivered through other international aid groups, salaries or cash assistance.

Sara Kayyali, who researches Syria for Human Rights Watch, called the findings shocking and said donors can no longer ignore the fact that they are effectively financing the Syrian government and its human rights abuses. She said UN procurement processes did not meet due diligence standards, from a human rights perspective.

The Syrian pound has been hit hard by war, corruption, Western sanctions and, more recently, a financial and economic collapse in neighboring Lebanon.



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## [Friday prayers resume in Iran after 20-month hiatus due to COVID-19](#)

Author:

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TEHRAN: Mass Friday prayers resumed in Tehran after a 20-month hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, state TV reported.

The prayers at Tehran University, a gathering of religious and political significance, came as authorities warned of a sixth wave of the coronavirus, which has so far claimed 124,928 lives in Iran and afflicted more than 5.8 million.

On Saturday, schools with fewer than 300 students are also due to reopen.

Also starting on Saturday, government employees, except those in the armed forces, will be barred from work if they are not vaccinated at least with a first dose, according to a government circular released earlier this week.

The government says more than 28.2 million people have so far received a second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

“Today is a very sweet day for us. We thank the Almighty for giving us back the Friday prayers after a period of restrictions and deprivation,” said Mohammad Javad Hajj Ali Akbari, Tehran’s interim Friday prayer imam who led the sermons.

Worshippers had to heed social distancing and use face masks during the gathering, a forum where officials present a unified front in the weekly sermon, a duty that rotates around senior members of Iran’s conservative clerical establishment.

Most worshippers brought their own prayer rugs and clay tablets used during prostration, said the broadcast.

It added Friday prayers were also performed in several other Iranian cities.

Health Minister Bahram Einollah said earlier this week that it was a “certainty” that Iran would face a sixth wave next week. The warning came even as the country has accelerated its vaccination drive.

Einollahi added that his country was well-prepared for the new surge.

Schools with more than 300 students will re-open on Nov. 6, Alireza Kamarei, spokesman for Iran’s Education Ministry, said earlier this week, adding that it was not essential for students and teachers to be vaccinated. He said 85 percent of the country’s teachers and 68 percent of students had so far been inoculated and that classrooms were well ventilated.

Required social distancing will remain at least one and a half meters.



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