

# US mediator and Lebanese officials discuss future of border talks with Israel

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BEIRUT: Amos Hochstein, the US envoy appointed by the Biden administration this month to mediate Lebanon's maritime border dispute with Israel, held talks on Wednesday with Lebanese President Michel Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Prime Minister Najib Mikati on the future of the negotiations.

Aoun expressed "Lebanon's readiness to continue to cooperate positively" with the process. However, the points of contention remain.

"The administration of President Joe Biden is ready to help Lebanon and Israel find a mutually acceptable solution to their common maritime borders," the State Department said.

Hochstein, who is also the State Department's senior adviser for energy security, also met Foreign Minister Abdullah Bou Habib, Energy Minister Walid Fayyad and army commander Gen. Joseph Aoun.

The speaker's office said Berri's discussion with Hochstein focused on "multiple files, particularly the demarcation of the maritime and land border between Lebanon and occupied Palestine. The framework agreement announced in October last year was confirmed."

The US administration's framework agreement for talks, which was implemented a year ago by Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David Schenker, includes two demarcation zones, for land and maritime borders. In accordance with the agreement, the US acts as mediator at the request of both sides.

Lebanon has been seen as struggling with the demarcation of its maritime borders. After submitting a border proposal to the UN in 2011, Lebanese officials decided that it was based on mistaken estimates and demanded an additional 1,430 square kilometers, an area that includes part of Israel's Karish gas field. The Israelis oppose this.

Berri told Hochstein: "We have a new opportunity to resume negotiations in the southern Lebanese town of Naqoura, thanks to the new US efforts in this context."

He also highlighted "the importance of excluding Lebanon from the sanctions of Caesar's law in the topics of piping Egyptian gas and electricity from Jordan through Syria to Lebanon." Lebanon has been experiencing widespread power outages as a result of fuel shortages amid a crippling economic crisis. The Caesar Act is US legislation sanctioning the Syrian government for war crimes against the Syrian people.

"The US envoy conveyed to Berri an optimistic view about positive progress being achieved in what relates to these matters," the speaker's office said.

Oil industry governance expert Diana Al-Qaisi told Arab News: “The US mediator has reached out to the Egyptian minister of electricity regarding redirecting the Egyptian gas into Lebanon.”

She added that Hochstein’s talks in Lebanon focused on diplomacy and how best to facilitate negotiations between Lebanon and Israel on their maritime border to agree a mutually acceptable solution, though Lebanon continues to stand firm in its demands.

Lebanese officials have yet to agree a strategy for the next phase of negotiations and their starting point for talks on the border.

The focus of Lebanese authorities then shifted on Wednesday to the nation’s financial crisis and a forensic audit of Banque du Liban, the country’s central bank. President Aoun met a delegation from the company Alvarez and Marsal, who informed him that the audit of the bank’s accounts was due to begin on Thursday morning. Aoun urged them to work quickly due to the urgency of the task.

On Tuesday, the International Monetary Fund opened negotiations with the Lebanese government to agree a strategy to begin to address the country’s insolvency.

Jihad Azour, director of the IMF’s Middle East and Central Asia department, stressed the need to address the losses faced by the financial sector and determine an accurate picture of the current financial situation in the country.

“Last time we had a full update of the situation was August 2020, before the resignation of the previous government, therefore many things have happened and we need to update the numbers and have a new baseline,” he said.





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## [Egypt: 19 killed in truck-microbus collision outside Cairo](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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Wed, 2021-10-20 16:45

CAIRO: A head-on vehicle collision Wednesday left at least 19 people dead and one other injured just outside the Egyptian capital of Cairo, state-run media said.

The Al-Ahram daily reported the crash took place when a passenger microbus collided with a truck on a highway that links Cairo's outskirts on the banks of the Nile River.

Another state-run daily, Akhbar el-Yom said the truck crossed to the wrong side of the highway and collided head-on with the microbus.

Footage circulating online purported to show bodies lying on the roadside as ambulances rushed to pick up casualties.

Traffic accidents kill thousands every year in Egypt, which has a poor transportation safety record. Crashes are mostly caused by speeding, bad roads or poor enforcement of traffic laws.

Last month, a bus overturned on a highway linking Cairo with the city of Suez, killing at least 12 people and injuring 30 others.

In April, a bus overturned while trying to pass a truck on a highway in the southern province of Assiut, leaving at least 21 people dead and three others injured.

Egypt's official statistics agency says around 10,000 road accidents took place in 2019, the most recent year for which statistics are available, leaving over 3,480 dead. In 2018, there were 8,480 car accidents, causing over 3,080 deaths.



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## 'People threatening Bitar are involved in the port blast'

Author:

Wed, 2021-10-20 03:06

BEIRUT: Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the investigation into the August 2020 port explosion, resumed investigations on Tuesday after being notified by the Lebanese Civil Court of Cassation of its second decision to reject the request submitted by the defendant in the case of MP Ali Hassan Khalil.

Normal service resumed at the Justice Palace in Beirut after a long vacation. The Lebanese army guarding roads leading to the palace and Ain Remaneh, which was the arena of bloody events on Thursday, over protests to dismiss Bitar from the case. The repercussions of these events have affected the political scene, its parties and the people.

Civil society activists under the auspices of the "Lebanese Opposition Front" staged a sit-in outside the Justice Palace to show "solidarity with the Judiciary carrying out its national duties and support for Judge Bitar to face the threats."

Speaking on behalf of the protestors, activist Dr. Ziad Abdel Samad said: "A free and sovereign state cannot exist without a legitimate authority, judiciary and justice."

Abdel Samad urged "the defendants to appear before Judge Bitar, because the innocent normally show up and defend themselves instead of resorting to threats."

"We have reached this low point today because of a ruling elite allied with the Hezbollah statelet, protected by illegal arms.

"They want to dismiss Judge Bitar in all arbitrary ways and threats because he has come so close to the truth after they managed to dismiss the former judge, hiding behind their immunities because they know they are involved in the crime."

Abdel Samad claimed that “those making threats are involved in the crime.”

Regarding the Tayouneh events that took place last week, he said: “They took to the streets to demonstrate peacefully, as they claimed, but they almost got us into a new civil war as a result of the hatred and conspiracies against Lebanon.”

Lawyer May Al-Khansa, known for her affiliation with Hezbollah, submitted a report at the Lebanese Civil Court of Cassation against the leader of the Lebanese Forces party, Samir Geagea, Judge Bitar and “all those who appear in the investigation to be involved, accomplices or partners in crimes of terrorism and terrorism funding, undermining the state’s authority, inciting a strife, and other crimes against the law and the Lebanese Constitution.”

Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah on Monday night waged an unprecedented campaign of accusations and incitement against the Lebanese Forces party and its leader.

Nasrallah accused them of being “the biggest threat for the presence of Christians in Lebanon” and said they were “forming alliances with Daesh.”

In a clear threat to Geagea and his party, Nasrallah bragged in his speech of having “100,000 trained fighters,” calling on Christians to “stand against this murderer.”

Nasrallah accused Bitar of “carrying out a foreign agenda targeting Hezbollah in the Beirut port crime” and of “being supported by embassies and authorities, turning him into a dictator.”

During the parliamentary session on Tuesday, no contact was made between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces. However, a handshake was spotted between the Lebanese Forces’ MP Pierre Abu Assi and the Amal Movement’s MP Hani Kobeissi.

Minister of Culture Mohammed Mortada, who represents Hezbollah, said “Hezbollah’s ministers will attend the ministerial session if Prime Minister Najib Mikati calls for one, but the justice minister and the judiciary must find a solution to the issue of lack of trust in Bitar.”

Several calls were made on Monday night between different political groups to prevent escalation and calm the situation.

Efforts are being made to reach a settlement that allows Bitar to keep his position and for defendants in the Beirut port case – who are former ministers and MPs – to be referred to the Supreme Judicial Council for prosecution.

Elsewhere, parliament dropped the proposal of a women’s quota ensuring female participation through a minimum of 26 seats.

It passed a move to allow expats to vote for the 128 MPs and dropped the decision to allocate six additional seats representing them.

The parliament's decision angered Gebran Bassil, who heads the Strong Lebanon parliamentary bloc. Following the parliamentary session, Bassil referred to "a political game in the matter of expats' right to vote, which we will not allow to happen."



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## [European court raps Turkey over presidential 'insults' law](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-10-20 02:35

STRASBOURG, France: Europe's top human rights court on Tuesday called on Turkey to change a law regarding insulting the president under which tens of thousands have been prosecuted, after ruling that a man's detention under the

law violated his freedom of expression.

Vedat Sorli was given a suspended 11-month jail sentence in 2017 over a caricature and a photograph of President Tayyip Erdogan that he shared on Facebook, along with satirical and critical comments.

There was no justification for Sorli's detention and pre-trial arrest or the imposition of a criminal sanction, the European Court of Human Rights court said.

"Such a sanction, by its very nature, inevitably had a chilling effect on the willingness of the person concerned to express his or her views on matters of public interest," it said.

The criminal proceedings against Sorli were "incompatible with freedom of expression," the court added.

Thousands have been charged and sentenced over the crime of insulting Erdogan in the seven years since he moved from being prime minister to president.

In 2020, 31,297 investigations were launched in relation to the charge, 7,790 cases were filed and 3,325 resulted in convictions, according to Justice Ministry data. Those numbers were slightly lower than the previous year.

Since 2014, the year Erdogan became president, 160,169 investigations were launched over insulting the president, 35,507 cases were filed and there were 12,881 convictions.

In a prominent case earlier this year, a court sentenced pro-Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas to 3-1/2 years for insulting Erdogan, one of the longest sentences over the crime, according to Demirtas' lawyer.

The court said Turkey's law on insulting the president affords the head of state a privileged status over conveying information and opinion about them.

It said the law should be changed to ensure people have the freedom to hold opinions and impart ideas without interference by authorities in order to put an end to the violation it found in Sorli's case.

## **10 diplomat summoned**

Separately, Turkey's Foreign Ministry summoned the ambassadors of the US and nine other countries to protest a statement they issued that called for the release of imprisoned philanthropist and civil rights activist Osman Kavala.

Kavala, 64, has been kept behind bars for four years, accused of attempting to overthrow the Turkish government through the 2013 nationwide demonstrations that started at Istanbul's Gezi Park. He has also been charged with espionage and attempting to overthrow the government in connection with a failed military coup in 2016.

The ministry said the ambassadors were told that "the impertinent statement via social media regarding a legal proceeding conducted by independent



judiciary was unacceptable.” Turkey rejects the attempt to “politicize judicial proceedings and put pressure on (the) Turkish judiciary,” it continued.

“Turkey is a democratic country governed by the rule of law that respects human rights, and it was reminded that the Turkish judiciary will not be influenced by such irresponsible statements,” the ministry added.



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## [Israel violates international law 'because it can,' UN Security Council told](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-10-20 00:50

NEW YORK: Israel pursues policies in violation of international law and of UN resolutions “Because it can – no tangible cost or consequence is attached,” the UN Security Council heard on Tuesday.

Daniel Levy, president of US/Middle East Project, told council members of the need to address what he called “an accountability deficit when it comes to Israel’s action” as it is one of the core understandings that should guide the peace process forward.

“If the unlawful and peace negating politics of Israel continue to be met with impunity, there should be no expectation of positive change.

Also to be considered is “a legitimacy deficit in Palestinian politics,” Levy said.

“The Palestinian Liberation Organization must become fully representative, inclusive and by extension better able to demonstrate strategic agency and to negotiate.

“Palestinians have a right to elect representatives to their national institutions. That requires a Palestinian leadership decision, as well as supportive, not preventive, steps by Israel and the International community.



Israeli activists of the Rabbis for Human Rights organization help Palestinian farmers harvest their olive trees in Burin village in the occupied West Bank, on Oct.19 2021. (Photo by Menahem Kahana / AFP)

“We also cannot ignore or condone when existing Palestinian self-governing authorities on the ground with their limited mandate repress their own

people.”

Palestinian politician, activist, and scholar Hanan Ashrawi told the ambassadors that everything must be viewed in the context of occupation.

The security council’s inability to assert its authority, Ashrawi said, has allowed “this injustice to become a perpetual tragic, human modern political and legal travesty.”

She discounted talk of confidence-building between Israel and the Palestinians as “there can be very little confidence under occupation.

“The policy of confidence-building measures is misguided because occupation brings only contempt, distrust, resentment, and resistance. The oppressed cannot be brought to trust or accept handouts from their oppressor as an alternative to their right to freedom.”

Another attempt at spreading misconception is the constant call for “balance in an unbalanced situation,” Ashrawi said.

“The mindless refrain that Israel has a right to defend itself while the Palestinian people are denied such a right is perverse, and that the occupier’s violence is justified as self-defense while the occupied are stigmatized as a terrorist.

“Peace is not achieved by normalizing the occupation, sidelining the Palestinian question, or rewarding it by repositioning Israel as a regional superpower.

“Such an approach maintains in place the causes of regional instability while enabling Israel as a colonial apartheid to superimpose greater Israel on all of historic Palestine.”

Israel’s permanent representative to the UN Gilad Erdan strongly criticized Ashrawi’s presence at the security council meeting.

“A spokesperson for Palestinian leadership was invited to represent civil society,” giving a platform to what he called “Palestinian rejectionism.”

Erdan slammed security council meetings on the Middle East for what he called disregarding “the real threat to regional and global security: Iran.

“Iran has assembled six armies of terrorist proxies in the region and by allowing the Ayatollah regime to continue with the severe violation of their international commitments, these six terror armies will soon have an Iranian nuclear umbrella.”

Before the meeting began, Erdan told reporters in New York that such meetings have the sole aim to “bash Israel” and are a “waste of everyone’s time.

“The security council members help dig the ditch of conflict deeper,” he said.

Erdan called on council members to “stand up to Iran and demand that Palestinian leadership abandon their culture of hate. This is the only way to transform the region into a paradise of progress, prosperity, and peace.”





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