

# No end in sight: Lebanon's government crisis rages on as country on its knees

Wed, 2021-08-25 20:47

DUBAI: More than 12 months since Lebanon's cabinet resigned and with the country teetering on the brink of collapse, politicians look unlikely to form a much-needed government any time soon, sources warn.

Despite one of the world's largest-ever non-nuclear explosions killing more than 200 people, soaring hyperinflation, food insecurity and crippling fuel shortages, leaders have continued to dig their heels in while two designated prime ministers have come and gone.

Najib Mikati, a billionaire businessman and former PM, is the latest to take on the mantle, promising a swift formation of a government within a month when he was appointed on Jul. 26.

"I gave my proposals, President Michel Aoun approved most of them and he made some remarks which are acceptable. God willing, we will be able to form a government soon," Mikati said two days later.

A month has passed, and Mikati is facing the same fate as his two predecessors – Mustapha Adib and Saad Hariri – who both failed to come to terms with Aoun.

Mikati is set to meet with the president on Thursday afternoon, with sources noting that both men are far from coming to terms on a government.

"I believe Mikati will be forced to step down at some point like the others," Mustapha Allouche, the Future Movement's vice president, the party formed by Hariri's late father, told Arab News.

According to Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing model, the president, a Maronite Christian, and the prime minister-designate, a Sunni Muslim, must both agree on a cabinet lineup in unison that is split equally between Christians and Muslims.

"What is happening now is merely a continuation of what has transpired over the past 12 months, with each political bloc maneuvering based on its own calculations," Rosana Bou Monsef, a political analyst and veteran columnist for Lebanese daily An-Nahar, told Arab News.

At the core of the issue, she said, is the president's Free Patriotic Movement trying to secure favorable terms in the upcoming government, which could stay in power until after Aoun leaves office next year.

Lebanon is set to hold parliamentary elections in May, which given the turbulent political landscape and security situation, could be delayed. This

would pave the way for the upcoming government to stay in place, take key decisions moving forward and exert pressure on political opponents.

“It is becoming increasingly clear that the problem doesn’t lie with who will head the government but with the president’s group’s unwillingness to form a government except on its terms,” Bou Monsef said.

After nine months of grueling negotiations and a number of public spats with the president, Hariri stepped down in mid-July, saying “God help Lebanon” as he left the presidential palace.

Hariri had accused the president of blocking the formation of a cabinet in which the FPM, the party he founded and currently headed by his son-in-law MP Gebran Bassil, lacks veto power.

Eddy Maalouf, an FPM parliamentarian, denied the accusations, telling Arab News that the deadlock stems from Hariri and Mikati’s attempts to encroach on the constitution and name several Christian ministers.

“They must afford the president’s bloc the same rights afforded to the other parties,” he said.

Further complicating matters is Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah’s announcement on Aug. 19 that the party had secured fuel shipments from Iran.

Amid typical governmental absenteeism, the Iranian-backed Hezbollah has seemingly taken matters into its own hands, vowing that fuel tankers would set sail to Lebanon from the sanction-ridden country.

If Hezbollah follows through with its promise and the tankers actually do dock in Lebanon, it would open up the Lebanese state to the possibility of sanctions from the US, which has vowed to punish anyone that deals with Tehran.

“The Iranian fuel has put Mikati in an extremely tough position as his government program was based on cooperating with the international community and Gulf countries to secure financial assistance for Lebanon,” Bou Monsef told Arab News.

This was echoed by Maalouf, who maintained that Mikati is “hesitating in moving forward with the formation of the government in light of this development.”

The possibility of Mikati stepping down is now gaining traction, Bou Monsef noted, “despite the international community urging him to move forward with negotiations.”

Mikati’s resignation would have a ripple effect across Lebanon’s political landscape, Allouche said.

“If Mikati steps down, we’ll have to reconsider our calculations,” Allouche said when responding to a question on whether Hariri’s Future Movement bloc

would resign from parliament.

Sami Fatfat, a Future Movement MP, held out hope that a government would be formed but assured his party is “looking into different options, including mass resignations” if Mikati steps down.

“The next couple of days will be decisive,” he noted, as Lebanon braces for the potential arrival of the first shipment of Iranian fuel coupled with the end of Mikati’s one-month deadline.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Najib Mikati](#)

[Michel Aoun](#)

PM-elect Mikati optimistic about new Lebanon government  
Lebanese President Aoun: We are on the brink of forming a new government

---

# Russia is playing S-400 card in Turkey for strategic purposes, say experts

Author:

Wed, 2021-08-25 19:14

ANKARA: Amid increased contact between Turkey and the western world over developments in Afghanistan and the potential refugee influx, Russia has placed the S-400 missile defense system on the table – a move that experts see as a strategy to drive Turkey away from the US and Europe.

Based on the comments by the head of Russia's arms exporter Rosoboronexport, the Interfax news agency said that Kremlin and Ankara are about to sign a contract to supply Turkey with a second batch of S-400 air defense units.

Turkish officials have not yet reacted to the claim.

The statement, which is seen as a move to damage Turkey's improved ties with the west and with Ukraine, coincided with the Crimea summit in Kiev, which Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu attended earlier in the week.

Turkey's initial purchase of S-400 from Russia was a sticking point with the US and the NATO allies, rendering Ankara subject to a series of US sanctions.

The US is concerned that the Russian defense system could compromise security if Russia becomes able to secretly acquire classified information on US and NATO weaponry.

The US has forbidden Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter jet program, and last month President Joe Biden said he would maintain sanctions on Turkey under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for buying the Russian system.

New sanctions from Washington could be disastrous for Turkey when its economy is still weak amid pandemic conditions.

Turkey's military test-fired the S-400 in the Black Sea province of Sinop in October 2020. However, it has not fully activated the defense system, in a move considered an olive branch to the new US administration.

"Considering that Turkey has not yet fully activated even the first batch of the S-400 system, it is not reasonable for Ankara to make a new agreement with Moscow on this issue," Prof. Emre Ersen, a Russia expert at Marmara University in Istanbul, told Arab News.

Ersen thinks the repeated statements from Russian officials regarding the S-400 seem to reflect Russia's unease about the prospects of closer Turkish-US ties under the Biden administration as Ankara has been trying to mend ties with its Western allies in the past few months.

"The latest developments in Afghanistan and Turkey's possible role in this

issue have provided a new momentum for Turkey's strategic relations with the West," he said.

Mevlut Cavusoglu and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov discussed the latest developments in Afghanistan on Aug. 18 and insisted on the necessity of ensuring security there.

But, a couple of days later Cavusoglu made a controversial statement during the Crimean Platform meeting in Kiev on Aug. 23, saying Turkey has not and will not recognize the illegal occupation of Crimea by Russia and will support Ukraine's territorial integrity.

"Since the S-400 missiles remain the soft underbelly of Turkish-US relations, Moscow is most likely trying to keep this issue high on the agenda as a political instrument to make sure that Ankara remains distant from Washington," Ersen said.

Under the \$2.5 billion deal that was signed in 2017, Russia was to supply Turkey with four batteries of S-400 surface-to-air missiles.

"So far, Turkey has bought two batteries, and the second batch was optional. However, Ankara and Kremlin have been negotiating loan agreements for a couple of years. No official has spoken about the purchase of the second unit since January 2020," Aydin Sezer, an Ankara-based Russia expert, said.

According to Sezer, Russia's messages aim to keep Turkey away from the West at times when Ankara attaches importance to its transatlantic ties.

"It is not realistic to expect Ankara to proceed with the purchase of a second batch of S-400 when it is making lobbying efforts to return to the US F-35 fighter jet program at the same time. Therefore, it keeps its silence and will only react positively to such politically motivated calls when a new crisis emerges in its ties with the West," he said.

Ankara and Washington held intense negotiations about the responsibility for security at Afghanistan's Kabul international airport following NATO's withdrawal and Turkey has used the airport mission offer as a potential area of cooperation to mend frayed ties with the US and other NATO allies, which have been tense over many issues.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Russia](#)

[Turkey](#)

[s-400 missile defense system](#)

Russia, Turkey close to signing new S-400 missile contract – IfaxUS, Turkey remain divided over purchase of Russia's S-400s

---

## [Fighting in Syria's Daraa displaces 38,000](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1629844522785587600

Wed, 2021-08-25 01:35

BEIRUT: Fighting between government forces and former rebels in the Syrian province of Daraa has displaced more than 38,000 people over the past month, the UN said on Tuesday, as truce talks falter.

Daraa, retaken by government forces in 2018, has emerged as a new flashpoint in recent weeks as government forces tightened control over Daraa Al-Balad, a southern district of the provincial capital, a hub for former rebel fighters.

Clashes, including artillery exchanges, between the two sides since late July have marked the biggest challenge yet to the Russian-brokered deal that returned the southern province to government control but allowed rebels to stay on in some areas.

Russian-sponsored truce talks launched in the wake of the latest fighting have made little headway as the government has stepped up its campaign to root out remaining rebel fighters from Daraa Al-Balad.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that 38,600 internally displaced persons are registered in and around Daraa, with most having fled from Daraa Al-Balad. "This includes almost 15,000 women, over 3,200 men and elderly and over 20,400 children," OCHA said.

It warned of a critical situation in the volatile district, saying that access to goods and services, including food and power, is "extremely challenging."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that government forces are restricting the entry of goods into Daraa Al-Balad, where it says 40,000 people still live.

"They are living under siege with families facing shortages of food, medical services, potable water, power and internet," said the monitor, which relies on a network of sources inside Syria.

The Observatory said that many in Daraa Al-Balad reject the truce terms being set by the government and its Russian ally.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

Aid groups: Millions in Syria, Iraq losing access to water  
In Germany, Syrians worry Afghan crisis could fuel anti-migrant vote

---

# Lebanese students face bleak return to classrooms amid energy crisis, currency collapse

Author:

Tue, 2021-08-24 21:56

BEIRUT: Lebanon's energy crisis and collapsing currency are creating bleak circumstances for the start of the new academic year, according to a report from the crisis observatory at the American University of Beirut.

Students are due to return to the classroom in a few weeks time, following Monday's announcement by Education Minister Tarek Majzoub about the "return of in-person attendance" after two years of remote learning.

Majzoub said the 2021-2022 academic year would start on Sept. 27 at the kindergarten level followed by the rest of the classes, leaving private schools the freedom to determine their own operating schedule, which normally starts early to late September.

But this year the outcry of parents unable to afford their children's transport costs and the increased tuition fees seems greater than previously.

And the outcry from educational institutions is worse.

Father Youssef Nasr, president of the General Secretariat of Catholic Schools, on Tuesday highlighted people's daily struggle to make ends meet.

One of the main issues posing a threat to the upcoming school year is fuel, which is required for heating, lighting and transport.

Its price soared after government subsidies were lifted and due to the continued implosion of the Lebanese pound.

The dollar exchange rate on the black market was around LBP19,000 on Tuesday. The figure changes on a daily basis.

According to the crisis observatory, student transport fees are double the tuition fees. The transport sector has threatened to increase the fee for one passenger to LBP25,000 (\$16.58, according to official rates).

The observatory calculated the prices of basic stationery – pens, notebooks and backpacks – at a minimum of LBP479,500 for each student, roughly 71 percent of the minimum wage.

Ghada, a 31-year-old mother who has three children at a private school in Beirut, asked: "Is it reasonable that I spend LBP1 million on each child every month to take them to school after the cost of fuel increased to



LBP250,000, in the event that it is available? This means LBP3 million for transport fees from Hadath (in the suburbs of Beirut) to Msaytbeh (in Beirut), without taking into consideration the cost of food, water, electricity, generator fees, medicine and everything necessary to survive. This is insane!”

In a stationery shop in the Furn El-Chebbak neighborhood, 35-year-old Raymond, a father of two, was astonished to see the prices of notebooks, fountain pens and pencils.

He said: “The price of one notebook is LBP45,000, which equals the price of 2 kilos of yogurt, and both are Lebanese products. They are robbing us, and no one is held accountable. This is humiliation! I am very angry. My monthly salary does not exceed LBP2 million. I am an employee. I was able to send my children to a private school but, after today, I may not even be able to send them to a public school.”

Activists have highlighted the skyrocketing prices of books that are printed and published in Lebanon. The price of the Arabic language book for fifth grade pupils is LBP500,000.

The crisis observatory’s report said: “Seventy percent of families relied on private schools, especially for the primary and middle level. Following the economic crisis, transfer to public schools has become the normal recourse, with more than half the Lebanese population living in poverty and the majority of families being unable to pay the tuition fees of private schools.”

Iman Alaywan, a professor at Beirut Arab University, said she was receiving daily calls from her desperately worried students about the next academic year and asking about the university’s solutions.

“The university’s administration is inclined to continue teaching remotely, in order to alleviate the burden of diesel and internet fees,” she told Arab News. “The university will allow recording the lectures that will be given on schedule for those who have electricity and internet at home. Those who do not have these services can review the lectures at a convenient time.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

Crisis-hit Lebanon to reopen classrooms starting next month  
Tehran is ready to ship more fuel to Lebanon if needed, Iranian official says

---

## [Israel's new leader to present Iran plan in first White House visit](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1629827522234400100

Tue, 2021-08-24 20:57

JERUSALEM/WASHINGTON: New Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett plans to push for a new Iran strategy during his first White House visit.

He is saying he will urge US President Joe Biden not to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.

Biden's aides hope the talks will set a positive tone for his relationship

with Bennett, a far-right politician and high-tech millionaire who ended Benjamin Netanyahu's record 12-year run as prime minister in June. This would stand in sharp contrast to years of tensions between the conservative Netanyahu, who was close to former President Donald Trump, and the last Democratic administration led by Barack Obama with Biden as his vice president.

The visit gives the US administration an opportunity to demonstrate business as usual with its closest Middle East ally while it contends with the chaotic situation in Afghanistan, Biden's biggest foreign policy crisis since taking office.

The talks will be relatively low-key. The two leaders are expected to speak briefly to a small pool of reporters during their Oval Office talks but will not hold a joint news conference.

Bennett is less dramatic but publicly just as adamant as Netanyahu in pledging not to allow Iran, which Israel views as an existential threat, to build a nuclear weapon, telling a cabinet meeting on Sunday the situation was at a critical point.

"Iran is advancing rapidly with uranium enrichment and has already significantly shortened the time it would take to accumulate the material required for a single nuclear bomb," he said.

Bennett said he would tell Biden: "This is the time to stop the Iranians, not to give them a lifeline in the form of re-entering an expired nuclear deal." A US official said Bennett's expected entreaties for the Biden administration to drop its efforts to revive the agreement are not likely to bear fruit. To Israeli acclaim, Trump in 2018 withdrew the United States from the deal between six world powers and Iran. He deemed it too advantageous for Tehran and reimposed US sanctions.

In a report seen last week by Reuters, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Iran had accelerated uranium enrichment to near weapons-grade.

Iran has consistently denied seeking a bomb, but the enrichment raised tensions with the West as both sides seek to resume talks on reviving their deal to curb Tehran's nuclear activities in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Bennett told his cabinet he would present Biden with "an orderly plan that we have formulated in the past two months to curb the Iranians, both in the nuclear sphere and vis-à-vis regional aggression." He gave no further details.

Asked on Monday about any new Iran strategy proposal from Bennett, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said: "I will leave it to the Israeli prime minister to describe to the American president any thoughts that the Israeli government may have when it comes to Iran."

Bennett, 49, is the son of American immigrants to Israel. A former head of Israel's main West Bank settlers council, he heads an unlikely coalition of left-wing, right-wing, centrist and Arab parties.

With consensus on Palestinian statehood virtually impossible within the diverse Israeli government, Biden and his aides are not expected to press Bennett for any major concessions toward the Palestinians in his first foreign visit.

But even with little sign of US pressure to resume peace negotiations with the Palestinians that collapsed in 2014, Israel faces concern from Washington over its settlement activity in areas it captured in the 1967 Middle East

war.

The Biden administration has already made clear it opposes further expansion of Jewish settlements on occupied land Palestinians seek for a state. Most countries consider such settlements illegal. Israel disputes this.

So far, Bennett, who has advocated annexation of parts of the West Bank, has moved cautiously on the settlement issue.

Scheduled approval last week of 2,200 new settler homes, along with 800 houses for Palestinians, was postponed, apparently to avoid dissonance with Washington ahead of his visit.

But rising tensions and violence along the Israel-Gaza border, three months after an 11-day war between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants, could cast a shadow over Bennett's trip.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)