

Palestinian Authority and Hamas argue over Gaza reconstruction

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GAZA CITY: Following the May 21 cease-fire between Hamas and Israel that ended the 11-day war, another battle is raging between Gaza's rulers and the Palestinian Authority (PA) amid disagreements over responsibilities for the besieged enclave's reconstruction.

Hamas has rejected a committee created by the PA in Ramallah, claiming that it did not consult or coordinate with the competent authorities in Gaza. Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since it took control of it by force in mid-2007, called for the formation of an independent professional national commission to oversee funds and aid for the reconstruction process, which the PA rejects.

Naji Sarhan, the undersecretary of Hamas's Ministry of Public Works and Housing in Gaza, said the PA deals with the reconstruction issue without a national partnership.

PA spokesman Ibrahim Melhem said that after the 2014 war a committee was formed comprising representatives from the government, Hamas and other Palestinian factions to oversee the reconstruction.

"The government is not in competition with any Palestinian party or faction, and is not interested in excluding anyone, but is rather keen on having unity to deal with all situations," Melhem said.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh has visited several countries, including several Arab states, to discuss Gaza's reconstruction and, according to Melhem, there is "a consensus among the Arab brothers that the PA is the main address through which reconstruction funds pass."

However, Sarhan accused the PA of dealing with Gaza arrogantly.

"How does the PA want to supervise the reconstruction and control funds while Shtayyeh made his foreign tour without visiting Gaza and seeing its needs, and without talking to us for the sake of mutual understanding?" he said.

Basem Naim, a member of Hamas' National Relations Office, said the group supports the formation of a national body that represents everyone and includes in its membership professional national figures and will oversee the funds and the reconstruction process.

He believes that the PA's supervision would "impede work." He said the experience of the 2014 war was "bitter" and Hamas would not accept a return to the previous mechanism, which was characterized by slowness and a lack of transparency.

The PA agrees with Hamas in rejecting a return to the UN reconstruction mechanism, which was put into operation after the 2014 war and gave Israel a free hand to control it in terms of oversight and limitations on the quantity and quality of construction materials.

Shtayyeh described this mechanism as "sterile and useless," and said it "is

suitable for monitoring a nuclear reactor and is not suitable for monitoring the reconstruction of Gaza.”

Melhem said the government is ready to discuss the most appropriate mechanism for the reconstruction.

According to Sarhan, 1,700 housing units have not been reconstructed since the 2014 war due to this mechanism, which Israel dealt with temperamentally. At a conference held in Cairo after the 2014 war, donors pledged more than \$5 billion, about half of which was allocated to the reconstruction process, and the other half to support the PA’s budget.

According to Sarhan, what reached Gaza from those funds did not exceed \$800 million.

Hamas accuses Israel of procrastination and of blackmail attempts aimed at linking the reconstruction to the issue of the prisoner exchange deal. After the meeting between Hamas chief in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, and the UN envoy Tor Wennesland last Monday, which Sinwar described as very bad, the mutual threats between Hamas and Israel have worsened.

Hamas accused the UN envoy of adopting the Israeli vision in terms of dealing with humanitarian issues in Gaza related to the siege and Israeli restrictions on crossings and reconstruction.

According to sources in the Palestinian factions, Egyptian mediators have been given an opportunity to resolve issues with the new Israeli government, following the failure of Wennesland’s mission.

Hamas strongly refuses to link the humanitarian issues related to the blockade imposed on Gaza for 15 years or the reconstruction, with other topics, the most important of which is the “prisoner exchange deal.”

Hamas insists on having Palestinians released from Israeli prisons in exchange for four Israelis it is holding, including the dead bodies of two soldiers who Israel says were killed during the 2014 war.

Hamas refuses to disclose their fate, in addition to that of two others who entered Gaza earlier in unclear circumstances.

Naim said that “Hamas is open to developing any new mechanisms that would ensure that funds and aid reach those who deserve it in Gaza.”

He warned: “The blockade is a time bomb,” and the countdown has begun, which means the explosion may occur any moment.



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[Drones hit near Iraq's Arbil](#)

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Sat, 2021-06-26 14:29

ARBIL: Three explosives-laden drones hit near the northern Iraqi city of Arbil, where the United States has a consulate, Iraqi Kurdish officials said Saturday.

The attack came as the Hashed Al-Shaabi, a pro-Iran paramilitary alliance opposed to the US presence in Iraq, held a military parade near Baghdad attended by senior officials.

The drone attack occurred overnight, the anti-terrorist unit in Kurdistan said, with two striking a house and causing damage while the payload on the third did not explode.

The US consulate condemned the assault in a tweet, saying "this attack represents a clear violation of Iraqi sovereignty".

US interests in Iraq have come under repeated attack in recent months but the use of drones is a relatively new tactic.

The United States consistently blames Iran-linked Iraqi factions for rocket and other attacks against Iraqi installations housing its personnel.

Since the start of the year there have been 43 attacks against US interests in Iraq, where 2,500 American troops are deployed as part of an international coalition to fight Daesh.

The vast majority have been bombs against logistics convoys, while 14 were rocket attacks, some of them claimed by pro-Iran factions that aim to pressure Washington into withdrawing all their troops.

In April, a drone packed with explosives hit the coalition's Iraq headquarters in the military part of the airport in Arbil, the Iraqi Kurdish regional capital.

The tactic poses a headache for the coalition, as drones can evade air defences.

In May a drone packed with explosives hit the Ain Al-Asad air base housing US troops.

On June 9 three explosives-laden drones targeted Baghdad airport, where US soldiers are also deployed. One was intercepted by the Iraqi army.

Earlier that day five rockets were fired at Balad air base, where American contractors are based, causing no casualties or damage.

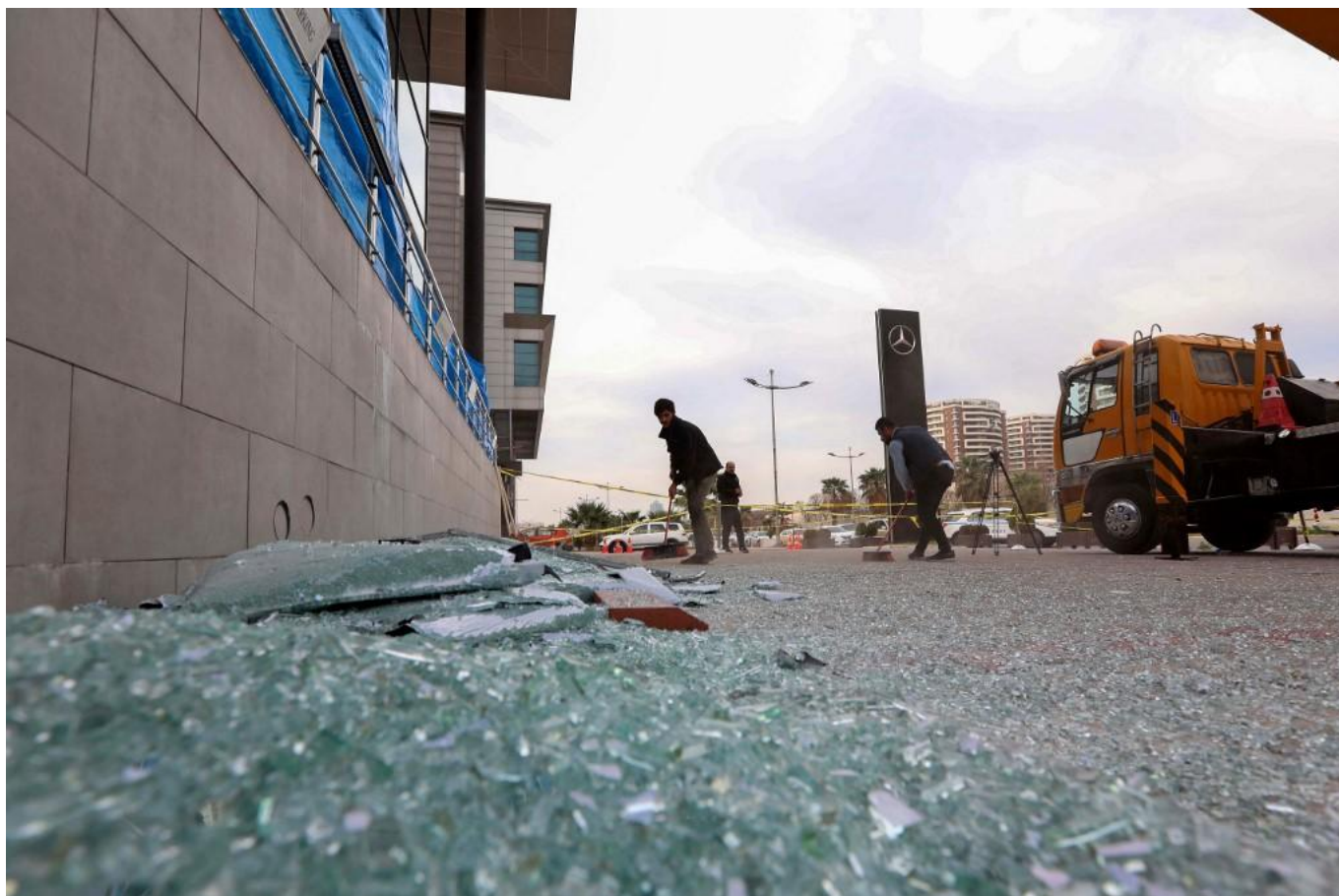
The attacks on the airport and Balad came as Iraqi authorities released Hashed commander Qassem Muslah.

Muslah had been arrested on May 26 by police intelligence on suspicion of ordering the killing of Ihab al-Wazni, a pro-democracy activist shot dead earlier that month by unidentified gunmen on motorbikes.

On Saturday, the Hashed, which analysts say has become the predominant force in Iraqi politics, held a military parade in Diyala province bordering Baghdad.

It was marking the seventh anniversary of the group which was formed in 2014 to battle Daesh that had seized almost one third of Iraq in a lightning offensive.

At the parade, Hashed displayed various weapons including rocket launchers mounted on vehicles, according to footage broadcast on Iraqi state television, to an audience comprising Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi.



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Explosives-laden drone targets US forces at Iraq's Erbil airport Iran-backed groups behind Erbil rocket attack -Iraqi Kurdish security agency

[External aid critical to avoiding greater Syria catastrophe: US official](#)

Fri, 2021-06-25 21:45

LONDON: Senior US state department officials have backed calls for an extension of a UN measure allowing cross-border aid into Syria, saying that it is "critical to avoiding a greater humanitarian catastrophe."

In a press briefing attended by Arab News on Friday, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Joey Hood outlined the US perspective on humanitarian and political developments on the ground in Syria. He also discussed the continued importance of confronting Daesh remnants both militarily and ideologically.

"The US supports all forms of assistance for the Syrian people, including cross-line assistance from Damascus," Hood said.

Cross-line assistance is named as such to reflect that it involves aid traveling across the front lines of the conflict, from government-held to rebel-held territory.

"The truth is, cross-line assistance alone cannot meet the current needs in Syria," Hood said. "Cross-border assistance is critical to avoiding a greater humanitarian catastrophe there."

For this reason, Hood said, the US fully supports efforts to renew a UN Security Council-approved cross-border aid operation into Syria for another year.

The future of this aid lifeline into Syria was thrown into doubt this past week, when Russian President Vladimir Putin, who holds veto power in the security council, questioned the importance of the cross-border aid operation, arguing that aid can be delivered to northern Syria from the capital Damascus. Russia is a long-time ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad and has supported his government militarily and politically throughout the war.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned on Friday that "a failure to extend the council's authorization would have devastating consequences."

During the briefing, Hood also said that the US supports a nationwide ceasefire to ensure the safe delivery of aid and to "alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people."

He added that the US is committed to keeping a "limited military presence in the northeast (of Syria) for the sole purpose of defeating ISIS (Daesh), in partnership with the Syria Democratic Forces, and to stabilize areas liberated by that group.

"Stability in Syria and the greater region can only be achieved through a political process that represents the will of all Syrians," Hood said. "We are committed to working with allies, partners, and the UN to ensure that a durable political solution remains within reach."

He added: "The international community must renew its shared goal to ensure the protection, dignity, and human rights of the Syrian people. There can be no sustainable end to the conflict without progress in this area."

Patrick Worman, acting director of the Office of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, warned that despite Daesh's territorial defeat, it "remains a determined enemy. There is still much work to be done in Iraq and Syria."

He said that the Joe Biden administration is committed to finishing the fight against Daesh and that this extends to countering their growing influence in other countries, notably in West Africa and the Sahel, where Daesh-affiliated groups have been gaining strength.

The US, he said, would continue to provide support to Iraq in its counter-insurgency operation against Daesh, and that community outreach work would be necessary to counter the group's "depraved ideology."

"In addition to security, we must also address remaining humanitarian stabilization and early-recovery gaps to help victims of ISIS' atrocities and others impacted by the conflict recover, and thus minimize ISIS' recruitment and resurgence ability," Worman said.

"As part of this civilian effort, ensuring ISIS members are held accountable for their crimes and promoting community-based reconciliation will be critical for countering ISIS messaging and combating ISIS' depraved ideology."



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UN chief warns no Syria cross-border aid would be 'devastating' Courage at forefront of World Refugee Day mural by Syrian artist

Tunisian PM Hichem Mechichi contracts COVID-19

Fri, 2021-06-25 19:37

TUNIS: Tunisia's Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi has been infected with the coronavirus, the government said on Friday.

Mechichi received a COVID-19 vaccine last month.

The prime minister will cancel his meetings and continue to work remotely, the government statement added.

Tunisia is seeing a significant increase in COVID-19 cases, with intensive care wards almost full, health authorities said adding that the situation is catastrophic.

After successfully containing the virus in the first wave last year, Tunisia is grappling with a rise in infections. The positive cases rate now is 36%. In total, Tunisia has recorded 395,000 coronavirus cases and about 14,406 deaths.



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Tunisia 'trailblazer' in Mediterranean seaweed farming
Tunisian cemetery offers living memorial to 'unknown migrants'

EU chief warns Erdogan over north Cyprus visit

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Fri, 2021-06-25 17:54

BRUSSELS: EU chief Ursula von der Leyen on Friday warned Turkey's leader not to jeopardize a push for better ties with the bloc by inflaming tensions on an upcoming trip to Cyprus.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said he will travel to Turkish-controlled northern Cyprus on July 20 for the anniversary of Ankara's 1974 invasion that led to the division of the island.

The controversial visit comes as the EU – of which Cyprus is a member – is looking to improve ties with its strategic eastern neighbor after tensions spiked in the eastern Mediterranean last year.

"This is a very sensitive topic for us. And we are very clear that we will of course observe how this visit will go and that we will never, ever accept as a European Union a two-state solution," von der Leyen told a press conference after an EU summit in Brussels.

"These clear messages have been sent. I said it personally to the president. So it's up to him now to set a positive signal."

Cyprus remains one of the major bones of contention between the EU and Ankara, after a push for two states from Turkish-Cypriot leaders backed by Erdogan helped torpedo efforts in April to restart peace talks.

Cyprus has been split since 1974, when Turkey occupied the northern third in response to a coup by an Athens-backed junta seeking to annex Cyprus to Greece.

The island is divided between areas controlled by EU member the Republic of Cyprus and the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Ankara.

Erdogan sparked anger from the Greek-speaking south last year with a visit to the beachfront area of Varosha, a one-time luxury resort turned ghost town along a UN buffer zone.

The EU in March held out a string of incentives to convince Erdogan to make good on pledges to mend fraught relations with the bloc.

But EU leaders meeting Thursday left Ankara disappointed, issuing a critical statement on rights in Turkey and failing to make clear progress on a customs treaty or commitment on aid.

Brussels is readying a plan to provide Turkey with 3.5 billion euros (\$4.2 billion) in extra funding from 2021 to 2024 to help it host millions of

refugees from Syria.

The leaders told the European Commission executive body to present a formal proposal “without delay.”

The Turkish foreign ministry said the statement “came well short of what was expected or necessary.”



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Turkey disappointed at EU summit outcomeNorth Cyprus head stands firm in row over Turkey criticism