

# Lebanese public sector workers go on strike amid worsening economic conditions

Wed, 2021-05-26 21:00

BEIRUT: Public sector employees in Lebanon staged a strike on Wednesday across public administrations and schools, following an appeal by the General Labor Union and the Public Sector Employees' Association, to demand an increase to wages and their purchasing power, which has vanished due to inflation, price rises and the collapse of the Lebanese pound against the dollar.

In the absence of official data on the number of state employees, the most accurate available figures indicate that there are 320,000 public sector employees: 120,000 in the army and Internal Security Forces, 40,000 in public schools, 30,000 in ministries and public administration, 130,000 in public institutions and municipalities, along with 120,000 retired soldiers and teachers.

Bechara Al-Asmar, head of the General Labor Union, attended a sit-in staged at the union's headquarters in Beirut: "Employees are suffering, the armed forces are complaining, and the country is collapsing. Our demand has become an order: Form a government before the collapse of the structure."

He added that around 250,000 Lebanese college graduates are jobless and people who have jobs are facing arbitrary dismissal.

"Forming a government will provide some political stability, pave the way for economic stability, and re-establish ties that have been cut with Arab countries, Western communities and donor institutions," he said.

Al-Asmar said: "Lebanon needs at least five years of relief. How will they provide funding? From the people's bank deposits again? Enough quota sharing, accusation swapping and random subsidies' lifting, without securing an alternative plan, just like what is happening today with food items, medicine and medical supplies."

Al-Asmar said that "having a capable government can help address corruption, conduct forensic audits and ensure the return of funds that have been smuggled abroad as well as the bank deposits to the Lebanese."

He warned of "the collapse of the security ecosystem, notably the National Social Security Fund."

Lamia Yammine, caretaker labor minister, voiced her support for the strike, tweeting: "They are paying the price for the political deadlock out of their living and integrity."

Before approving the public sector salary law in 2017, a total of 8,300

billion Lebanese pounds (\$5.4 million) was allocated for the salaries of public sector employees per year. This figure jumped to 12,000 billion Lebanese pounds after 2017, constituting 86 percent of the state's total revenues, which amounted to about 14,000 billion Lebanese pounds.

The purchasing power of the Lebanese – whose salaries are paid in the pound – has dropped by 85 percent and the financial collapse has affected all the corrective salary procedures that were adopted in 2017.

Meanwhile, people in Lebanon queued at grocery stores and supermarkets to buy the remaining subsidized goods. They also queued at gas stations to fill their cars, with the Banque Du Liban's complicated petroleum products import procedures and the dollar shortage creating a fuel shortage. The number of families living under the poverty line has increased to between 700,000 and 800,000.

Soldiers queued up inside a subsidized supermarket allocated to aid the army, waiting for subsidized goods to be unboxed before racing to compete over buying them.

The Supreme Defense Council held a session on Wednesday, chaired by Aoun. Mohammed Fahmi, caretaker interior minister, detailed to senior military and political officials the measures that have been taken to address smuggling – most notably the smuggling of illegal narcotics – through Lebanese territories in light of Saudi Arabia's recent decision to ban imports of Lebanese agricultural products.

The council said in a statement that “thanks to the speedy measures taken by the customs and military and security bodies, several smuggling operations have been foiled.”

It added: “A bidding process will be organized within a month, after developing the related rulebook, to provide border crossings with scanners.”



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## [Turkey tracks down, detains members of terror groups in latest ops](#)

Wed, 2021-05-26 20:22

ANKARA: Turkish police on Wednesday detained seven suspected members of the Jabhat Al-Nusra organization during a counter-terrorism operation in the capital Ankara.

Anti-terror teams were also hunting four other people still at large and thought to be linked to the movement that was originally established in Syria and has been classified by Turkey as a terror group since 2014.

Simultaneous operations have been taking place against Daesh in Turkey with police recently arresting several senior operatives in various cities.

On Tuesday, police caught 16 Daesh suspects in a countrywide operation in 11 provinces, one day after another suspected Daesh member of Syrian nationality was held in the central Anatolian province of Nigde.

Meanwhile, on Monday, a Daesh suspect named Mustafa Abdulvahap Mahmut, was detained in Istanbul. An explosives specialist who is also being sought by the US, Mahmut was reportedly planning to carry out a terror attack in Turkey. The operation was held jointly between American and Turkish intelligence units.

Last week, a Daesh suspect was stopped by Turkish police 500 meters away from the US Consulate in Istanbul, while another one was detained on the top floor of a nearby building.

In early May, Basim, codenamed Afghan jihadist, one of the closest figures to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the former Daesh chief who was killed two years ago by the US, was detained in Istanbul with a fake passport.

Nihat Ali Ozcan, a senior foreign affairs expert at Ankara-based think tank TEPAV and a former Turkish military commander, told Arab News that Turkey had become the preferred location for Al-Nusra sleeper cells in the region.

“It is not surprising that they are still active in Turkey. They are establishing their link with the outside world through Turkish territories in terms of logistics, networks, and manpower,” he said.

According to Ozcan, their expanded and hidden presence posed a threat not only to Turkish domestic security but also to the West, and Russia.

“The changing parameters in Syria’s rebel-held province of Idlib are also noteworthy because Al-Nusra recently got all small dissident groups under its hegemony and eliminated them. They are now trying to boost their leverage for preserving their authority in the region,” he added.

The dominant rebel group governing Idlib and its surrounding regions is still Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), an offshoot of Al-Nusra Front.

Al-Nusra is amassing chemicals in Idlib to use against civilians and plot a false flag chemical attack in Syria, the Russian Foreign Ministry recently claimed.

On Tuesday, the Russian Defense Ministry’s Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria announced that Jabhat Al-Nusra carried out 46 shelling attacks against Idlib in one day from its positions in Syria.

Experts also noted that similar counter-terrorism operations and the revelations of some underground networks generally happen in spring and summer in Turkey and the frequency of the operations keeps increasing until September when the mobility of the terror groups gradually decreases in the region.

Ozcan did not anticipate a strategic and political collaboration of Al-Nusra and Daesh on Turkish soil at the present time despite members of both groups being caught simultaneously in a week.

“They have a common denominator by hitting Western targets. They can carry out tactical cooperation, but they do not have organic ties and their end targets are different,” he said.



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## [UK's Raab arrives in Israel, calls for cycle of violence to end](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-05-25 22:27

LONDON: Britain's foreign minister Dominic Raab said on Tuesday a cycle of violence between Israelis and Palestinians must end as he arrived for talks following the worst outbreak of fighting in years.

"I will meet with both senior leaders here and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories on how to make the recent ceasefire lasts," he wrote on Twitter. "We must end the cycle of violence and make progress towards a lasting peace."



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## [UN rights council to mull international probe after Gaza conflict](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2021-05-25 22:19

GENEVA: The UN Human Rights Council will consider launching a broad, international investigation into abuses in the latest Gaza conflict and also into "systematic" abuses, according to a proposal tabled Tuesday.

The draft resolution will be discussed during a special session of the council Thursday, requested amid 11 days of deadly violence between Israel and armed Palestinian groups in Gaza this month.

The text, presented by Pakistan on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, calls for the UN top rights body to "urgently establish an ongoing independent, international commission of inquiry... in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and in Israel."

The investigators, the text said, should probe "all alleged violations and abuses" of international law linked to the tensions that sparked the latest violence.

Before a truce took hold last Friday, Israeli air strikes and artillery fire on Gaza killed 253 Palestinians, including 66 children, and wounded more than 1,900 people in 11 days of conflict from May 10, the health ministry in Gaza says.

Rocket and other fire from Gaza claimed 12 lives in Israel, including one child and an Arab-Israeli teenager, an Israeli soldier, one Indian national and two Thai workers, medics say. Some 357 people in Israel were wounded. But the draft text goes far beyond the most recent conflict, also calling for investigators to probe "underlying root causes of recurrent tensions and

instability, including systematic discrimination and repression based on group identity.”

The investigation should focus on establishing facts and gather evidence and other material that could be used in legal proceedings, and as far as possible should identify perpetrators to ensure they are held accountable, it said.

“Long-standing and systemic impunity for international law violations has thwarted justice, created a protection crisis and undermined all efforts to achieve a just and peaceful solution,” the draft text said.

It remains unclear whether there will be enough support at the Human Rights Council to pass the resolution.

Twenty of the council’s 47 members were among the 66 countries that backed holding Thursday’s special session, which was requested by Pakistan and the Palestinian authority.

The rights council holds three regular sessions each year, but can hold special sessions if at least a third of members support the idea.

Thursday will mark the 30th extraordinary meeting of the United Nations’ top rights body since its creation 15 years ago, and it will be the ninth focused on Israel.

When the special session was announced last week, Meirav Eilon Shahar, Israel’s ambassador in Geneva, urged member states to oppose it.

“The convening of yet another special session by the Human Rights Council targeting Israel is testament to the clear anti-Israeli agenda of this body,” she said on Twitter.

Israel is in fact the only country that is systematically discussed at every regular council session, with a dedicated special agenda item.

That Agenda Item 7 was one of the main reasons that the United States under former president Donald Trump decided to leave the council.

His successor Joe Biden has returned the United States to the fold as an observer, with an eye on membership, but his administration remains deeply critical of the council’s “disproportionate focus on Israel.”





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## [US, Europeans warn Syria vote 'neither free nor fair': joint statement](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-05-25 22:18

US, Europeans warn Syria vote 'neither free nor fair': joint statement



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