

Gunmen kill wanted Libyan commander in new sign of instability

Wed, 2021-03-24 21:18

TRIPOLI: Gunmen assassinated an eastern Libyan commander wanted for war crimes on Wednesday, medics said, underscoring the risks of violent escalation on the ground that poses the biggest challenge to Libya's new unity government.

Mahmoud Al-Werfalli was shot from a car outside a hospital in Benghazi alongside two of his bodyguards, military sources said, amid growing friction between rival factions in eastern Libya.

Werfalli was a commander in an elite unit attached to Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), a coalition of forces that has dominated eastern Libya in recent years.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague has indicted Werfalli twice for the suspected killing of more than 40 captives, including in a 2018 incident in which photographs appeared to show him shooting 10 blindfolded prisoners.

This month he was shown in a widely circulated video raiding a car showroom in Benghazi alongside his uniformed men, smashing up furniture and computers as they brandished weapons.

Friction between rival factions in eastern Libya has been escalating for some time and could further degenerate into a series of retaliatory attacks, said Tarek Megerisi of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

"I think this is going to be the first major challenge for the (Government of National Unity) GNU," he said.

The GNU was sworn into office this month, taking over from the two rival administrations in east and west that have run Libya for years, as part of a UN-facilitated peace effort.

The eastern administration, backed for years by the LNA, handed over its powers to the GNU on Tuesday at a ceremony in Benghazi.

Besides the challenge of merging Libya's divided state institutions and preparing for elections in December, the GNU needs also to tackle a dire security situation with power held by myriad factions.

On Wednesday, UN Special Envoy Jan Kubis told the Security Council: "Various armed groups continue to operate without hindrance, human rights violations continue with almost total impunity."

Last week, GNU Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dbeibeh said his government would open an investigation after the discovery of bodies in Benghazi.



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[Diab rules out reforming resigned Lebanese government](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-03-24 21:06

BEIRUT: Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab has ruled out the possibility of reinstating the government he led until its resignation on August 10, 2020.

In a statement issued on Wednesday, Diab said: "Defining the powers of a caretaker government and the role of the resigned Cabinet requires a constitutional interpretation, which is the exclusive right of parliament."

Diab was, indirectly, responding to an invitation issued by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah a few days ago to reactivate the resigned government, as President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri

remain in deadlock over the formation of a new government for the crises-stricken country.

Diab continued his statement by saying that eight months after his cabinet resigned in the aftermath of August's devastating Beirut Port explosion, "efforts have not succeeded in forming a government that would save Lebanon from its current crisis. Things have even gone beyond logic and the government's formation has become a national crisis, which has exacerbated the suffering of the Lebanese. Forming a new government remains a priority."

The formation of a new government remains fraught with difficulty, however, given the vast political gulf between the two sides. Aoun is reportedly insisting that he and his allies be granted a third of cabinet portfolios, effectively handing them the power of veto over any major government decision. His demand has the indirect support of Hezbollah, which is calling for a "techno-political government," while other parties are backing a government consisting of independent ministers with no party or bloc enjoying a 'blocking third.'

Aoun met with the ambassadors of France and Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to try and clarify his position. The Lebanese media described those meetings as "an attempt to be granted clearance and to hold Saad Hariri responsible for the delay." However, the Saudi ambassador's statement from the presidential palace about respecting Lebanon's sovereignty, not interfering in others' affairs and committing to the Taif Agreement suggested that attempt failed.

Saudi Arabia's Ambassador Walid bin Abdullah Bukhari tweeted on Wednesday that his visit to Aoun "came after three persistent and recurrent invitations from the presidential palace."

Bukhari also met the Ambassadors of France, Anne Grillo; the US, Dorothy Shea; and Kuwait, Abdel-Aal Al-Qenaie on Wednesday. According to sources with knowledge of their meeting, the ambassadors expressed "discontent at the Lebanese officials' performance regarding the governmental issue."

Former lawmaker Fares Souaid told Arab News, "The constitution is suspended and neither Saudi Arabia nor France is controlling (Lebanon's) internal affairs. The reason behind the constitution's suspension is Hezbollah."

After meeting with the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rai, former Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk said, "Lebanon has become a state whose legitimacy and policy are occupied," adding that the only viable option at this point is "to support Al-Rai's neutrality initiative to liberate Lebanon from Iranian political occupation."

Pressure on officials to expedite the formation of a salvation government mounted on Wednesday as the economic commissions and Labor Union held a meeting to discuss "the disaster that is about to hit the Lebanese if a government is not formed soon."

Civil society is also exerting pressure on merchants controlling the price of food in the country. A campaign has been launched on social media urging the

Lebanese to boycott eggs and chicken for a week, after the price of a carton of eggs hit 40,000 pounds (\$26.20) and a kilogram of raw chicken 30,000 pounds.

Elsewhere, Hezbollah-appointed Minister of Health for the caretaker government Hamad Hassan visited his Syrian counterpart Hassan Al-Ghobash in Damascus on Wednesday.

Hassan thanked Syrian President Bashar Assad for “the decision to provide Lebanon with 75 tons of emergency supplies of oxygen to assist patients on respirators.”

Hassan said the agreement with the Syrian ministry was “a brotherly, verbal (one) that has medical and humanitarian dimensions.”

Lebanon is currently avoiding any official dealings with the Syrian government to avoid the sanctions of the Caesar Act.



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Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Diab threatens to 'refrain' from exercising his duties
Lebanon stalemate continues after 18th Aoun-Hariri meeting collapses

Syria to send Lebanon emergency oxygen supply for hospitals

Wed, 2021-03-24 21:10

BEIRUT: The government of war-torn Syria said Wednesday it will send emergency oxygen supplies to neighboring Lebanon, which has experienced shortages amid a surge of coronavirus infections in both countries. The gesture comes as the health care sectors of the neighboring countries face serious challenges compounded by the pandemic and unprecedented economic woes.

Lebanon Health Minister Hamad Hassan told Lebanon's al-Manar TV the oxygen was a "direct gift" from Syrian President Bashar Assad, who responded to Lebanon's humanitarian request for the oxygen.

Syria's health care infrastructure has been battered by a 10-year war and dependency on foreign aid as Assad's government faces growing Western sanctions.

For Lebanon, Syria's gesture comes at a time of political deadlock among rival groups who are deeply divided over Syria. Hassan is allied with the Iran-backed Hezbollah group, which has been a main backer of Assad.

Syrian Health Minister Hassan Ghabbash said his visiting Lebanese counterpart would depart Damascus with the first batch of oxygen from Syrian plants. The amount going to Lebanon, reported to be 75 tons by Syrian media, won't impact needs in Syria, he said.

Lebanon's health minister Hassan said oxygen supplies would last only through Wednesday. The supplies from Syria would avert the loss of "thousands of lives," he said.

"There are currently a thousand patients in Lebanon on ventilators. The amount of oxygen we have is sufficient for today," Hassan said.

The situation in Syria is also critical. World Health Organization officials said hospital beds are at full capacity in the capital Damascus, and infection cases are at their highest amid a dearth of testing capabilities. Syria has recorded more than 17,000 infections and 1,175 deaths. The country is in a deep economic crisis, with more than 80% of the population living in poverty.

Both countries are witnessing an unprecedented crash of their local currencies.

Lebanon has been struggling with a surge of infections since the start of 2021 and a weeks-long lockdown has only brought the numbers down slightly. WHO said intensive care-unit beds are more than 85% full in the small country of 6 million people, including over 1 million Syrian refugees.

Since last year, Lebanon has recorded nearly 445,000 infections and 5,850 deaths.

A vaccination campaign began in Lebanon last month, with over 970,000 people registered to be vaccinated and some 156,000 doses already administered.

Syria said it has received some vaccines but it has yet to launch a national vaccination campaign. WHO announced Tuesday it will oversee a vaccination campaign in Syria expected to start in April with the aim of inoculating 20% of the population by the end of 2021.



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Tue, 2021-03-23 23:19

US and Iraq will hold strategic dialogue in April , the White House said.

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[**Aoun turns to diplomats in bid to break Lebanon's political deadlock**](#)

Tue, 2021-03-23 23:15

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun asked for diplomatic assistance on Tuesday in an attempt to overcome the political deadlock surrounding the attempted formation of the country's new government.

The move came after Monday's meeting with Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri failed yet again to agree on a new cabinet as Aoun insisted on getting a "blocking third" in the proposed government.

Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Walid bin Abdullah Bukhari was one of two diplomats to visit with Aoun on Tuesday.

"I told President Aoun that the Kingdom is committed to Lebanon's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity," Bukhari said after his first visit to Lebanon in almost two years.

"I stressed the importance of putting the national interest first in order to move forward with the implementation of drastic reforms that could restore the international community's confidence."

Bukhari also called on parties to accelerate the formation of a government capable of achieving the aspirations of the Lebanese people.

"Saudi Arabia has always expressed its support and solidarity with the brotherly Lebanese people, steadfast in the face of crises," he said.

French Ambassador to Lebanon Anne Griot also met with Aoun on Tuesday but did not make a statement.

Another failed attempt to form a government sparked more security and economic concerns on Tuesday. The dollar exchange rate reached 15,000 Lebanese Pounds (LBP) to the dollar, which was an increase of LBP4,000 in a single day.

I told President Aoun that KSA is committed to Lebanon's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

Walid bin Abdullah Bukhari, Saudi ambassador to Lebanon

According to a security source that spoke to Arab News, there has been an increase in armed robberies during the economic crisis, which has also led to the theft of government property.

Iron manhole covers have been stolen off the roads in several regions in an attempt to be sold for scrap, while a high-tension tower in Northern Bekaa reportedly fell because the steel mesh corners supporting the tower were taken by thieves. The fall cut transmission lines between the Deir Ammar Power Plant and other power stations.

Lebanon's national electricity company, Electricite du Liban (EDL), said: "We found out that the corners of other towers were stolen, putting them at risk of falling. Repairs will require time and there is a difficulty finding the necessary financing in foreign currencies."

The country's critical situation prompted UN Deputy Special Coordinator for Lebanon Najat Rushdie to call on political leaders for action.

"Lebanese leaders should put their differences aside, assume their responsibilities, put an end to the current state of failure, listen to the people's desperate calls and provide them with solutions," Rushdie said.

"The UN remains committed to supporting the Lebanese people and the country's stability, political independence and sovereignty."

The Arab League, represented by assistant secretary-general Hossam Zaki, called upon the political parties “to put the national interest first and work urgently to overcome the political deadlock that has exacerbated the suffering of the people.”

According to Sky News, Zaki said Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit is greatly concerned by the Lebanese political disputes and feels the country is headed toward a severe crisis.

“The Arab League is ready to do whatever is asked of it in order to bridge the gap and find an agreed-upon solution that would allow the prime minister-designate to form his government,” Zaki said.

“It should be a government that operates through the skills of specialists in order to save Lebanon from its difficult current situation by implementing the necessary reforms that meet the ambitions and aspirations of the Lebanese people.”

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai on Monday and expressed “his great interest in the situation in Lebanon,” stressing the importance of forming a government and keeping Lebanon away from all conflicts.



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Aoun and Hariri exchange accusations as Lebanon government hopes fade