

# Lebanon facing coup threat, Maronite leader warns rally

Author:

Sun, 2021-02-28 00:02

BEIRUT: The leader of Lebanon's influential Christian Maronite church has warned that the country is facing the threat of a "full-fledged coup," and called for an international conference to avert "chaos, hunger and oppression."

In an emotional address to thousands of followers on Saturday, Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai said that he was "drawing red lines for anyone who harbors evil for Lebanon, regardless of their sect."

His comments were widely seen as a veiled reference to Iran-backed Hezbollah along with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and its founder President Michel Aoun.

"We are facing a full-fledged coup attempt," Al-Rai told Lebanese who traveled to the church's headquarters in Bkerke to support his demand for a UN-sponsored international conference to save Lebanon.

In response to the patriarch's speech, people chanted: "Hezbollah is terrorist," "Get out, Iran" and "Michel Aoun, leave."

Cries of "Revolution! Revolution!" were also heard.

The Bkerke rally went ahead despite measures to limit gatherings amid the coronavirus pandemic, with some observers suggesting it could signal an end to the stalemate in Lebanese politics.

**We want to provide support to the Lebanese Army, making it Lebanon's sole defender.**

**Patriarch Bechara, Boutros Al-Rai**

The FPM, led by Gebran Bassil, did not attend, saying it feared that the gathering "would be used against it," according to affiliated websites. Sources at Bkerke told Arab News that Al-Rai decided to speak out "because Lebanon is facing an existential threat" following the failure of a string of initiatives, including his efforts to reconcile Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri.

Banners unfurled on the dome of the Bkerke church read: "Neutrality, sovereignty, and stability," "Lebanon comes first and last," and "Bkerke for all of Lebanon."

Al-Rai said at the outset of his address: "Long live a single, united and neutral Lebanon that is active, positive, sovereign, independent, free and strong."

He said: "We are demanding this now because all other solutions have reached a dead end, and we have not been able to agree on the fate of our country, nor even to discuss our homeland's affairs. We support finding a solution inside Lebanon."

## BACKGROUND

**The Bkerke rally went ahead despite measures to limit gatherings amid the coronavirus pandemic, with some observers suggesting it could signal an end to the stalemate in Lebanese politics.**

He added: "To let hunger and oppression destroy the country is something we do not accept in any way. Rejecting the proposed solutions means chaos and seizing the levers of power."

Al-Rai called for an international conference to ensure Lebanon's neutrality, so that it "is no longer a victim of conflicts and wars, and a land of division."

He added: "We want the state to extend its authority over the entire Lebanese territory. We want to provide support to the Lebanese army, making it Lebanon's sole defender."

Al-Rai said the UN-sponsored conference also should agree on a plan "to prevent the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and ensure a safe return for Syrian refugees to their homeland."

He said: "We do not want armies and camps, nor do we want Lebanon to be undermined. Lebanon's borders are not subject to amendment, its Christian-Muslim partnership is untouchable, and its democracy is not subject to veto." The patriarch called on protesters to continue to speak out, saying: "Do not remain silent in the face of corruption. Do not tolerate the theft of your money, the fluid borders, the failure of the political class, the chaos in the investigation into the Beirut port explosion, or the imprisonment of the innocent.

"Do not tolerate the failure in forming a government and implementing reforms."

Participants in the rally, many from different sects, told Arab News that Al-Rai is their last hope.

"No politician cares for the collapsing state. Politicians have left us on our own," said one.

A Muslim woman in her 50s said: "This is an opportunity to raise our voice. The patriarch's stances are patriotic, and history will remember him. The country is collapsing."

A man in his 40s said: "I have come to Bkerke to say that people suffer from hunger and despair, and there is nothing left to lose."

Internal security forces personnel were deployed on the road to the church's headquarters, and those entering the square were searched.

Before the gathering, Hezbollah and FPM supporters took to social media to share tweets opposing the event.



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## [Houthis take 500 families hostage in Marib battle](#)

Sat, 2021-02-27 22:30

AL-MUKALLA: Hundreds of Yemeni families trapped inside their camps in Marib province by Iran-backed Houthis are being used as a human shield against government forces, a Yemen government unit has claimed.

In a report seen by Arab News on Saturday, the internationally recognized government's Executive Unit for IDP Camps said that militia fighters had besieged camps and planted land mines on main roads to stop families escaping and hinder advancing troops.

"Houthis have prevented 470 families from fleeing, using them as human shields. Until today, many families in the camps are still trapped by the Houthis," the report said.

Militants recently stormed several displacement camps in Serwah, west of

Marib, blocking people's escape to safer areas.

The government unit has appealed to the rebels to stop using displaced families as hostages and allow them to leave the camps.

"The Executive Unit for IDP Camps calls on the Houthis to respect international humanitarian law and stop targeting civilians and displaced persons, and to open safe corridors in order to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid."

The Houthis earlier this month renewed a bloody offensive on Marib, an oil-rich city and the government's last bastion in the northern half of the country. For four weeks, the Houthis have faced stiff resistance from government forces backed by massive air and logistics support from the Arab coalition.

Army commanders say that hundreds of Houthis have been killed, wounded or captured and their advance on Marib halted.

Maj. Gen. Nasser Al-Thaybani, commander of the army's Military Operation Authority, said that more than half the Houthi fighters sent to seize Marib have died or been wounded in the fighting, while army troops and allied tribesmen have pushed back all of the Houthi attacks on government-controlled areas.

Yemeni government forces also suffered heavy casualties during fierce clashes.

Local officers and media said on Saturday that Brig. Gen. Abdul Ghani Sha'alan, commander of the Special Security Forces in Marib, was one of several government soldiers who died in fighting with the rebels near Balouq mountain in Serwah district, west of Marib city, on Friday.

A local military officer, who declined to be named, told Arab News that Sha'alan was leading government troops pushing back a Houthi attack on the peak, which was claimed by government forces last week.

Several army commanders and tribal leaders have been killed since the beginning of the rebel offensive on Marib.

Yemen's Foreign Ministry on Saturday criticized international rights groups over their failure to "name and shame" the Houthis for attacking residential areas after the densely populated city was targeted by 10 ballistic missiles in the previous 24 hours.

"Since the beginning of February, the province has come under the largest and fiercest Houthi attack in which the militia used all kinds of heavy weapons, including artillery, explosive-laden drones and ballistic missiles," the ministry said in a statement.

On Friday, Yemen's Prime Minister, Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed, hailed military support from the Arab coalition to help tilt the war in the army's favor, vowing to continue backing army troops and tribesmen until they push the

Houthi out of areas under their control.



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## [Syria strikes: Biden warns of 'consequences' for Iran's militia support](#)

Author:

By LOLITA C. BALDOR, ROBERT BURNS and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA | AP

ID:

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Fri, 2021-02-26 23:56

LONDON: US airstrikes in Syria demonstrate that Iran should expect retaliation for supporting militia groups that threaten American interests, President Joe Biden has warned.

"You can't act with impunity. Be careful," he said when asked about Friday

morning's strikes on Syria's eastern border with Iraq.

The Pentagon said the attack was carried out by two US Air Force F-15E aircraft that fired seven missiles.

The pair destroyed nine buildings used by Iran-backed militias and heavily damaged two others in eastern Syria.

Officials said the strikes were not intended to destroy the groups, but to demonstrate that the US "will act firmly" to avoid greater regional escalations.

The airstrikes were "legal and appropriate" as they "took out facilities housing valuable capabilities used by the militia groups to attack US and allied forces in Iraq," officials said.

Sen. Jim Inhofe, the leading Republican on the Senate Committee on Armed Services, said the decision was "the correct, proportionate response to protect American lives."

Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said Biden "used his constitutional authority to defend US personnel."

She said the strikes were designed to deter future actions by Iran-backed militias following a rocket attack on Feb. 15 in Iraq that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a US service member.

Pentagon chief spokesman John Kirby said the strikes resulted in "casualties," but declined to comment on the details.

An Iraqi militia official with close links to Iran said one fighter was killed in the strike and several others wounded.

The group housed in the compound is known as Kataeb Hezbollah, or Hezbollah Brigades – an Iraqi Shiite paramilitary group sponsored by Iran.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitoring group, said the strikes targeted a shipment of weapons. It reported that 22 fighters from an Iraqi umbrella group of militias were killed.

Kataeb Hezbollah confirmed that one of its fighters was killed and warned that it had the right to retaliate.





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## [Algeria anti-govt protesters hit streets after year-long hiatus](#)

Sat, 2021-02-27 01:50

ALGIERS: Thousands of anti-government protesters took to the streets of Algeria's capital on Friday as the Hirak pro-democracy movement gathers renewed momentum after a year-long hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic. Despite a ban on gatherings over the pandemic, crowds gathered in several neighborhoods of Algiers in the early afternoon and marched toward the city center, AFP journalists said.

"It's awesome. It's like the big Friday Hirak protests," one demonstrator

said.

The Hirak protests were sparked in February 2019 over former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term, and the long-time leader was forced from power in April that year.

Demonstrators kept up weekly protests after Bouteflika's resignation, demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

They only suspended marches last March due to coronavirus restrictions, but calls have recently circulated on social media for a return to the streets.

## **BACKGROUND**

**The Hirak protests were sparked in February 2019 over Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth presidential term, and the long-time leader was forced from power in April that year.**

Protesters on Friday were met by security forces who used truncheons and fired tear gas when a crowd forced its way through a police barrier to reach the Grand Post Office, the main Algiers rallying point of the Hirak protests, footage posted on the Interligne news site showed.

The crowd chanted "Civil state, not military state" – a key rallying cry of the protests, which refers to the military establishment that holds sway over Algerian politics.

Police vans took up positions near main squares in the city center and roadblocks were set up on several major roads leading into the capital. Rallies were also held in some provinces, including in northeastern Kabylie and northwestern Oran, where a prominent human rights activist, academic Kadour Chouicha, was arrested, according to prisoners' rights group CNLD. In Algiers, people among the crowd said there appeared to be at least as many people in the streets as last Monday, when thousands marched to mark the second anniversary of the Hirak protests.





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Thousands march through Algiers on anniversary of Hirak protests  
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## [UN agency's decision to cut aid to Gaza Strip refugees raises concern](#)

Sat, 2021-02-27 01:40

GAZA CITY: Mohammed Rashwan is worried for his family of 10 after a decision from the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to reduce aid to Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip.

He was diagnosed with cancer about seven years ago and relies on the relief aid provided by the agency.

"A single basket of aid is not enough for us for a month, but it used to fill part of our needs, in addition to relief aid from local institutions," he told Arab News.

He qualified as being a member of the poorest group of beneficiaries and so received double aid, known as the "Yellow Coupon."

But on Feb. 20 UNRWA said it was canceling this coupon, which helps 770,000 Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. The strip is home to 2 million Palestinians.

Rashwan described the decision as “unjust” because it did not take different living conditions into consideration.

Under the new system, he will lose about half the aid he used to receive every three months, and there will instead be a unified food basket system for all beneficiaries.

Last Sunday he, along with other angry refugees, protested the coupon’s cancellation by closing UNRWA supply centers.

A meeting held last Monday by the Joint Committee for Refugees with the director of UNRWA’s operations in Gaza, Matthias Schmale, failed to dissuade the agency from its decision.

## **FASTFACT**

**Cancer victim Mohammed Rashwan describes the UN Relief and Works Agency’s decision as ‘unjust’ because it does not take different living conditions into consideration.**

Committee member Bakr Abu Safiya said there was agreement between different refugee representative bodies about challenging the UNRWA decision, with the agency being given a Monday deadline to pledge a written letter rescinding its decision.

Abu Safiya added that it was too early to talk about options if UNRWA stuck to its guns, but stressed there would be “a program of action and we will not violate the rights of refugees, and the matter may reach the point of demanding the firing of Schmale.”

Schmale, who was appointed to the post in Oct. 2017, has not enjoyed a good relationship with refugee representatives in Gaza.

Abu Safiya described Schmale as “elusive” since taking office and said he had made decisions that were “harmful to refugees, such as reducing services, stopping employment, and fabricating a crisis of employees’ salaries.”

The meeting with Schmale was “stormy and did not produce a result,” he said. “We will wait for an official position until Monday, after which the response will be considered.”

UNRWA was established in 1949 by a UN General Assembly resolution. It provides services in various sectors to about 5.6 million Palestinian refugees registered with it in its five fields of operations: Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. UNRWA media adviser, Adnan Abu Hasna, said the agency would adhere to its decision and not back down.

“UNRWA, in its new vision for the distribution of foodstuffs, wants to produce a fairer and more transparent system for new groups that will be included in the base of beneficiaries of food aid.”

According to Abu Hasna, the new system would benefit tens of thousands more refugees, with an increase of 10 kilos of flour per person.

But Abu Safiya described the new system as a “crime against refugees” and accused the agency of manipulating the numbers of beneficiaries.



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