

In blast-hit Beirut, 'invisible' elderly women face destitution

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1605212062769165200

Thu, 2020-11-12 20:05

AMMAN: Thousands of elderly women in Beirut whose lives were upended by a huge blast in August now face destitution, as Lebanon buckles under financial crisis and a COVID-19 lockdown, charities said.

The United Nations (UN) and aid agencies said older women living alone made up almost one in 10 households in areas hit by the explosion, which wrecked swathes of Beirut, killed 200 people, injured thousands more and displaced 300,000.

"A mental health hotline responder noted a rise in calls from older people contemplating suicide," UN Women and others said in an analysis, calling for emergency aid in Beirut to better target potentially "invisible" elderly people.

"Because of higher rates of physical disabilities among older people, combined with increased inability to leave their homes, limited economic means and fears around COVID-19, older women are struggling to access assistance."

With almost 100,000 COVID-19 cases and some 700 deaths since February, Lebanon announced a new coronavirus lockdown this week to stem rising infections, with hospitals unable to find beds to admit critical cases, caretaker prime minister Hassan Diab said.

Before the August explosion, which officials blamed on unsafely stored ammonium nitrate, Lebanon was already grappling with worsening poverty, the scars of civil war three decades ago and a financial crisis rooted in corruption and mismanagement.

Some elderly people in Lebanon feel they are a burden on younger relatives, charities said, as there is no state pension in the Middle Eastern country and only retirees who were in formal employment receive financial support in old age.

Old women are often left in poverty. Lebanon has one of the world's lowest rates of women in the workforce, with less than one in three in paid employment, according to UN Women.

"Because they are women, they are less likely to have worked throughout their lives, which means they are less likely to have savings, they are less likely to have a pension," said Rachel Dore-Weeks, head of UN Women in Lebanon.

"Because of this, they are less likely to have the economic resources to react, respond and recover from the crisis."

Widows are often unable to support themselves financially so they rely on their children, who then count on their children to do the same for them in old age, said Maya Ibrahimchah, founder of Beit el Baraka, a non-profit that supports elderly people.

"We don't want parents to always be a burden on their kids," she told the

Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"These three post-war generations are not living. They are surviving in order to take care of the previous generations."

Beit el Baraka was one of the leaders of Beirut's large community-led effort after the blast to help rebuild homes, provide aid, medication and psychological support.

One of its main goals is to help elderly people with rent and utility payments so that they are not forced out of their homes into cheaper accommodation or on to the streets.

"It's very difficult at 70 to leave your whole life, your friends and neighbors behind, and go rent a small room in a poor area where you don't know anyone," Ibrahimchah said.

"(We) need to make sure that they can stay in their homes and be taken care of until this economic crisis is over."

Plans to expand social protection schemes to tackle poverty, including a universal state pension, were put on hold after the government resigned in the wake of the August blast, said Assem Abi Ali of the social affairs ministry.

"One of its main components addresses the issue of caring for the elderly through a pension scheme ... in order to protect them from destitution, hunger and homelessness," said Abi Ali who supervises its crisis response plan, which began in 2015.

Working with humanitarian groups, the ministry helped deliver food aid, wheelchairs and crutches to elderly and disabled people after the blast, Abi Ali said.

But Dore-Weeks said more needed to be done to provide elderly women, disproportionately living in poverty and alone, with medical and emotional support during the pandemic.

"There is a huge need for tailored psychosocial support for these communities and that is a real challenge in the context of COVID-19 when so many face-to-face interactions are deemed unsafe," she said.



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How the port explosion rubbed raw Beirut's psychological scars
A Syrian refugee whose fridge was stolen from his home in Homs finds it in Beirut

[UK removes quarantine restrictions from 3 Gulf states](#)

Thu, 2020-11-12 22:39

LONDON: The UK government has taken three Gulf countries off its mandatory quarantine list, which instructs arrivals to self-isolate for two weeks to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

Travelers from the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar will no longer have to adhere to the quarantine regulations.

Paul Charles, CEO of PC Agency travel consultants, welcomed the move to ease travel to and from the Arab states, calling it "a highly significant decision

and a major boost to opening up long-haul travel from the UK again.”

He added: “Unlocking Gulf hubs such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar enables UK travelers to reach most corners of the world to the east and south ... These moves show that the government is serious about connecting the UK to the world again, despite the pandemic.”



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As some nations open, UK to quarantine arrivals for 2 weeksUK will ditch travel quarantine for 75 countries, Daily Telegraph says

[Analysts debate impact of Israel-UAE-Bahrain accords at Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate](#)

Wed, 2020-11-11 23:18

DUBAI: The recent normalization of relations between Israel and two Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the UAE and Bahrain, could well prepare

the ground for a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This was among the key observations of experts who took part in a panel discussion as part of the three-day Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate.

Sprinkled with references to strategic “recalculations” and “game changers,” Tuesday’s session, titled “The Gulf: Recalculations,” was one of the highlights of the seventh Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, organized by the UAE’s Emirates Policy Center.

“The geopolitical map of power distribution in the Middle East has been changing,” said Abdulla bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, chairman of the Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (Derasat).

“If we look at the past two decades, we find that some countries previously played a central role but, for reasons of civil war, insecurity or economic stagnation, no longer do so. If we look at the Gulf in particular, we find that having quickly become a front runner, it is leading the region in terms of peace, economic development and political and regional affairs.”

Al-Khalifa said that GCC states, compared with the rest of the region, have successfully preserved their domestic security, continued to focus on positive economic development, provided necessary and advanced services to its people and residents and attracted great minds from all around the world.



Another strategic potential cited by Amos Yadlin at ADSD was more cooperation among Gulf states, Israel and the US to cope with “Iranian terror activity” and proxies of Iran, which he said were destabilizing the Middle East.

(AFP/Khamenei.ir/File Photo)

“There are very positive indicators that show that the Gulf is in a better-off position,” he said. “Forecasts indicate that were the Gulf to continue on such a positive economic development trajectory to 2030, it would be the sixth biggest economic bloc in the world, and this says a lot.”

To put the GCC’s achievements in perspective, Al-Khalifa cited a UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimate that placed the number of refugees leaving their hometowns – mainly from the Middle East toward Europe –at 225,000 in 2014. A year later, that number quadrupled to just above one million, before starting to gradually decrease.

“What happened during 2015 alone was the continuous channeling of funds toward areas of tension and the financing of terrorist and extremist organizations in parts of the Middle East,” he said. “This caused more instability, which undermined the security of many different countries in the region and which has led to more refugees fleeing toward Europe.”

Al-Khalifa took note of the (maximum) “economic pressure” brought to bear on Iran by the Trump administration and the labeling of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization last year but cautioned that no decisive action has been taken. “Many are of the notion that the current Iranian regime is betting on a new US administration,” he said. “And we are still to see the final results of the US elections, which are yet to be reflected in developments in the Middle East.”

For his part, Albadr Alshateri, former politics professor at the National Defense College in Abu Dhabi, described the advent of the Abraham Accords – signed by Israel, the UAE and Bahrain – as one of necessity, owing to the geopolitical competition that is so “pervasive” in the region. He said the treaty’s three signatories all regard Iran as a common threat, adding that they have come together because of the gradual “erosion” of the Arab state system, which has been on the decline, particularly since 1990 and the invasion of Kuwait.

FASTFACTS

Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate

- * The 7th ADSD was held on Nov. 9-11**
- * Main topics were pandemic, US elections and UAE-Israel treaty**
- * Discussions were conducted via Zoom and live-streamed on social media**

“The Arab state system was a structure that shaped the foreign policies of different Arab states and provided leadership in the face of external threats and challenges,” he said. “Since that decline or erosion, core Arab states are now basically in chaos or are failed states, like Syria and perhaps Iraq. Egypt is also maybe too busy with itself to play the big role it used to in the regional system.”

From a global standpoint, Alshateri said that “a center of gravity” was lacking, as Washington’s declining role in the region will not allow it to play its traditional role of maintaining political order therein. He expressed cautious optimism by calling on the need to see results of the normalization of relations between Bahrain, the UAE and Israel leading to more countries joining the peace process.

“I personally advocate for something like a Westphalia peace treaty for the whole region where all countries, regardless of their ethnic composition or beliefs, can coexist in peace and harmony,” Alshateri said.

“If they cannot exist in harmony, at least they can exist within secure borders. If the new Abraham Accords can create such an environment or transformation, then we can talk about game changers. What impact the normalization of relations will have in the future is something to be tested.”



Erel Margalit, founder and chairman of Jerusalem Venture Partners (JVP), visits with members of Israeli high-tech delegation the Dubai Financial Market (DFM) on October 27, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

In conclusion, Alshateri called for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to be resolved, adding that it is the core issue between Arabs and Israelis. “Solving this problem will push us forward to a more stable and secure region,” he said. “Absence of that will make it harder. There will be great resentment publicly.”

Participating in the same panel discussion, Amos Yadlin, a retired major-

general in the Israel Defense Forces and executive director of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, chalked up the Israel-UAE-Bahrain normalization process to a convergence of interests and values, including modernization, moderation, stability and peace.

"The potential of a game changer is to show the public in the Middle East, which is suffering from civil wars in Syria, Libya and Iraq, the negative influence of Turkey and Iran and to show that there is another way of having better relations that will trickle down to everyone, not only among leaders," Yadlin said.

"The potential is also there to move forward on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. The UAE stopped the annexation, and the Palestinians can come back to negotiate. It's going to be even easier with the new US administration. The Gulf has figured out that it can use the peace accords to promote negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians."

Another strategic potential cited by Yadlin was more cooperation among Gulf states, Israel and the US to cope with "Iranian terror activity" and proxies of Iran, which he said were destabilizing the Middle East.

"We can cooperate here," he said. "We are not looking for war, nor clashes. But the very fact that Iran will know we are sharing intelligence and we are together to cope with the challenges is another opportunity for a game changer in the Middle East. If trust is built among the leaders and the people, we can all see a better Middle East."

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Experts weigh up Biden's Middle East policy options at Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate
Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Netanyahu discuss UAE-Israeli ties

[UN accuses Turkey of turning blind eye to Iranian assassinations](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-11 23:09

LONDON: Ankara allowed Iranian intelligence officers to plot and carry out extrajudicial killings on Turkish soil, according to two UN rapporteurs.

They also accused Ankara of allowing the escape of a man allegedly involved in the killing of Iranian journalist Masoud Molavi Vardanjani in Istanbul in

2019.

In a letter to Turkey's government, Agnes Callamard, UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, and Javaid Rehman, special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, accused it of having "failed to conduct appropriate, formal investigations into the killing."

They urged Ankara to provide information on any investigation carried out or ongoing, the possible misuse of the Iranian consular premises in Istanbul, and to give details "about existing policies and measures aimed at ensuring that foreign intelligence officers are not allowed to perpetrate or orchestrate extrajudicial killings on Turkish territory."

Citing the 2003 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Turkey is a signatory, the letter said states "must take appropriate measures to protect individuals against deprivation of life by other states in areas operating on their territory, and states also have obligations under international law not to aid or assist activities undertaken by other states that violate the right to life."

It added: "Under international law in all suspected cases of extra-legal, arbitrary and summary executions, states have an obligation to conduct 'thorough, prompt and impartial investigations'. Failure to conduct such an investigation may trigger additional violations of the right to life."

Vardanjani was shot in Istanbul on Nov. 14, 2019, reportedly at the behest of Iranian agents operating from their country's consulate in the city.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later described it as "another tragic example in a long string of suspected Iran-backed assassination attempts" of dissidents.

Vardanjani had fled Iran a year earlier and established a channel on the communications platform Telegram, called "Black Box," to report on corruption allegations against senior Iranian politicians, lawyers and other members of the establishment, as well as to criticize the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Three months before his murder, he posted a message on social media saying: "I will root out the corrupt mafia commanders. Pray that they don't kill me before I do this."

The UN rapporteurs said prior to his death, Vardanjani was "befriended" by an Iranian named Ali Esfanjani, who was allowed to flee Turkey three days after the murder despite a Turkish police report released by Reuters later naming him as the coordinator of the attack, and as having reported on Vardanjani to Iranian intelligence for months beforehand.

In its response, Turkey accused the rapporteurs of behaving in a manner "not consistent with diplomatic practices."

Its permanent representative to the UN added in a diplomatic communiqué that "nine individuals, four of whom are foreign nationals enjoying neither

diplomatic nor consular immunity, were arrested and put under pre-trial detention” for their alleged roles in the assassination.



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Erdogan aide faces new accusations over judicial interference

[Libya talks reach breakthrough on election roadmap, UN envoy says](#)

Wed, 2020-11-11 22:21

TUNIS: Political talks in Tunis on Libya’s future have reached a breakthrough, the United Nations acting Libya envoy said on Wednesday, paving the way towards elections within 18 months.

The participants reached a preliminary agreement on a roadmap to parliamentary and presidential elections that includes steps to unite Libya’s institutions, Stephanie Williams said at a news conference in Tunis.

She said Tuesday's "heinous killing" of dissident lawyer Hanan Al-Barassi in the eastern city of Benghazi showed there was a crisis of accountability across Libya.

After years of chaos and warfare in Libya, with key institutions held by rival factions riven by political, regional and ideological divisions, and foreign powers pouring in arms, many Libyans remain sceptical of peacemaking efforts.

However, the Tunis talks, which began on Monday, follow a ceasefire agreed last month between the main warring sides – the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the west and the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA).



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UN launches new Libya talks amid cautious optimism
Libya's rivals start UN-led talks to reach political accord