

US official promise help to Beirut

Sat, 2020-08-15 22:31

BEIRUT: US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale toured the site of the explosion that occurred in Beirut's port on Aug. 4 on the third day of his visit to Lebanon. He seemed very stunned by the horror of the destruction. In a statement, he said: "Every sovereign state, controls its ports and its borders thoroughly and I imagine that all Lebanese would like to return to that era and not have the 'anything goes' atmosphere that we've seen in the recent years."

"Seeing what happened with the naked eye differs from watching it on television," Hale said.

The American official praised the "impressive international efforts, in which many countries are participating."

A team from the FBI is scheduled to arrive today to participate in the investigations to ensure that the Lebanese get answers about and the circumstances of the explosion. "The investigation will be comprehensive and transparent, as everyone demands, especially the Lebanese people," Hale said.

The judiciary arrested 19 people, including two former and current directors of the port, pending the referral of the file to the judicial investigator who was appointed to tackle the case.

The Lebanese are awaiting the results of the investigation conducted by a French team that arrived in Lebanon hours after the explosion to help the Lebanese army. Several foreign rescue teams have participated in the clearance operations to recover the victims trapped under the rubble. Many of those who were working in the vicinity of the blast are still missing.

FASTFACT

A team from the FBI was set to arrive on Saturday to participate in the investigations to ensure that the Lebanese get answers about and the circumstances of the explosion.

The death toll has so far reached 173 dead and 6,000 injured. More than 80,000 homes have been damaged.

The Engineers' Syndicate, the Engineering Authority of Beirut Municipality and private engineering companies are undertaking surveys of the affected area to find out which buildings need to be demolished.

Meanwhile, humanitarian air bridges with Lebanon continue to provide it with medical and relief aid.

Opposite Beirut's port, a French helicopter carrier carried a unit of French military engineers in and engineering vehicles and equipment to clear debris from the site of the explosion.

The Lebanese army said: "The French helicopter carrier is also loaded with medical and food supplies, building materials, and two vehicles designated as a gift to the Lebanese Civil Defense."



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[Beirut blast brings fresh misery to displaced Syrians in Lebanon](#)

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DUBAI: It was 2012, and Lina Attar Ajami was spending the summer in Canada when a bomb went off near her neighborhood of Rawda in Damascus.

Her father called her immediately and told her not to return to Syria. "You must go to Beirut and find a house and make your life there," Ajami recalled being told.

She followed his instructions and moved to an apartment in Saifi Village, an upscale neighborhood within walking distance of Gemmayze, the beating heart of Beirut.

"You escape a country for security. You escape a war of nine years in order to give your children security and not let them be exposed to the atrocities of war. But this – the Aug. 4 blast in Beirut – is worse than anything my family went through during the Syrian civil war," Ajami told Arab News by phone from Beirut.

Even before the blast, Lebanon was in a state of free fall following months of economic and political turmoil marked by mass unemployment, hyperinflation and social unrest.

But the devastation caused by the blast has wreaked unprecedented havoc on the Lebanese capital, leaving an estimated 300,000 homeless and an even larger number of people in need of assistance of some kind.

Of the 177 deaths confirmed so far, 43 were Syrians working at the Port of Beirut, according to a statement from the Syrian Embassy in the Lebanese capital. The UN refugee agency has put the Syrian toll at 34, of which eight bodies are still missing.

The workers were refugees, earning daily as little as 50,000 Lebanese pounds (\$33). Their bodies, like their existence up until Aug. 4, are unlikely to be unaccounted for.

Each of their families, living in the blast-devastated capital of a crisis-torn country, has likely lost not only its breadwinner but also its livelihood.



A picture of victims is displayed inside their damaged apartment facing the port of Beirut following the cataclysmic explosion. (AFP)

Ajami's 12-year-old daughter was severely wounded in the blast. "We live on the 11th floor, so I could see the port. I heard my daughter screaming in the salon. I ran there and found her covered in blood. Blood was all over the walls," she said.

Ajami's husband carried his daughter downstairs and dashed off in search of a hospital, but they were full beyond capacity. "People were getting into fights just to get their loved ones admitted," she said. "It was hell."

The couple decided to take their daughter to south Beirut, where they found a hospital willing to admit her. She has since undergone two surgeries and is currently recovering.



Volunteers distribute aid supplies to those affected by the cataclysmic explosion in Beirut's port area, on August 12, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

"There's nothing more disturbing than thinking you're in the safety of your home and a sudden blast takes away all the security you thought you had in your adopted country," Ajami said. "As Syrians, this is our second loss. It's beyond description."

The Syrians currently in Lebanon, estimated at 910,000, are a mixture of registered and unregistered refugees, as well as migrant workers and others.

Those who fled Syria because of the civil war kept most, if not all, of their life savings in banks in Lebanon.

The value of their deposits has eroded drastically since the start of the economic and financial crisis.

FASTFACT

Syrians in Lebanon

- * At least 34 Beirut blast victims were Syrian workers.
- * Lebanon hosts 890,000 Syrian refugees.
- * Two-thirds of the refugees live below poverty line.

*** Lebanon's estimated population is 6 million.**

"Syrians relocated to Lebanon and placed all their wealth in Lebanese banks, knowing that no other country would agree to open bank accounts for Syrians," said Ajami. "Their savings have dwindled in real terms as a result of the stringent capital controls."

According to Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, the Syrian government estimated in January the total amount belonging to Syrians in Lebanese banks at about \$45 billion – roughly a quarter of deposits held by Lebanese banks.

That said, many Syrians are content with having survived the blast that shattered Beirut. "I was sure by the time someone asked about me I'd be dead," said Haidara M., a kickboxing instructor who left Syria in 2016 in search of a better life in the Lebanese capital.

At the time of the blast, caused by a long-neglected stock of ammonium nitrate, Haidara was in the bathroom of his apartment.



Lina Attar Ajami's apartment, where her 12-year-old daughter was severely wounded in the blast. (Supplied: Lina Attar Ajami)

Freeing himself of the debris that fell on him, he ran out into the middle of a street in the hope that someone would help him. "I'm afraid of dying in a country without any family to bury me," he told Arab News.

A Syrian who lives in the Lebanese capital and works with an international NGO said: "Syrians living in Beirut have been affected on an emotional level. They fled Syria to Lebanon to live in a safer place, but are now trying to leave Lebanon for the same reason."

He added: "We still don't have clear information regarding Syrians living in Lebanon who've been affected by the blast. No one knows the names of the 43 Syrians who died at the port."

One Syrian national who has returned to Damascus following the explosion is Rana Tamimi, who specializes in marketing and communications.

She was allowed to cross the border into Syria after she took a COVID-19 test (for which she paid 150,000 Lebanese pounds) in Beirut and got a negative result.



A general view shows the Moroccan field hospital in Karantina neighbourhood near the port of Beirut, on August 12, 2020. (AFP)

"I moved to Beirut from Damascus eight years ago after a big explosion behind my house in Damascus," she told Arab News.

"There was a lot of fear in the streets then and I had to leave. The effect of the explosion that happened in Beirut was equal to the sum of the horrors of eight years of war."

Nimat Bizri, a half Algerian, half Syrian woman married to a Lebanese man who has lived in Lebanon for 24 years, said: "Since the blast, I feel helpless and depressed ... The border to Syria has remained closed for three months now due to COVID-19. There's no light at the end of the tunnel."

Bizri runs the Social Support Society, an NGO founded in 2006 that provides quality programs and opportunities to Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. It caters to 2,500 students spread over five centers located in different villages.

But Syrians face an altogether new challenge in the wake of the destruction in Beirut. Cases have come to light of discrimination against migrants and refugees trying to access emergency aid.

"No support is being given to Palestinian and Syrian refugees who've been working and living in Beirut," said Bizri. "The Lebanese people haven't been giving them support since the explosion."

Dalia Al-Ogaily, a Syrian-Iraqi resident of Beirut who previously lived in Syria, recently joined a group of friends who had volunteered to do social work in different parts of the city.



Survivors of Beirut's August 4 blast are still in shock over a disaster that disfigured their city. The earth-shaking explosion killed 171 people and wounded more than 6,000, a sickening blow to a country already in crisis.

(AFP)

"On our way to downtown Beirut, we spotted the Banin Charity Association in action so we offered to help," she told Arab News.

"Initially they allowed us to help people in the neighborhood by interviewing them and assessing their needs. However, after a few hours, when we ran into a Syrian woman in need, the coordinator of the charity told us not to help her because, according to its policy, it's meant to help only Lebanese."

The incident sparked controversy on social media that culminated in the resignation of Fadi Al-Khateeb, a renowned Lebanese footballer, from his position as the Banin Charity Association's goodwill ambassador.

Complaints of discrimination against non-Lebanese in aid distribution also prompted Alexandra Tarzikhan, a Syrian human rights lawyer based in Chicago, to comment: "The blast didn't discriminate when it chose whose lives to take and which houses to destroy."

In recent years, Gulf Cooperation Council member countries have become the home of many Arab families fed up with their home countries' poverty, corruption, sectarian politics and conflict.



Firefighters carry the coffin of their colleague Joe Noun, who was killed in Beirut's massive blast, during his funeral at the fire station in Karantina neighbourhood near the port on August 12, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Syrians and Lebanese are among the tens of thousands who have chosen to start a new life in the UAE, drawn by the lure of peace and financial security.

Leaving his home in Damascus in 2012 to escape the war, Alaa Krimed lived for two years in Beirut before moving to Dubai.

Now the Syrian-Palestinian is the artistic director of the Sima Dance Co. in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue.

"I loved Beirut, but I also hated Beirut because I struggled a lot there," he told Arab News, recalling the need to reapply for residency papers every three months. "The people are wonderful but the government is corrupt, and

this is why I moved from Beirut to Dubai.”

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London-based Lebanese non-profit at forefront of Beirut fundraising US calls for credible probe into 'overwhelming' Beirut blast

[Trump wrote to Assad about journalist missing in Syria, says Pompeo](#)

Sat, 2020-08-15 01:30

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump personally wrote to his Syrian counterpart Bashar Assad about the case of journalist Austin Tice, who has been missing since 2012, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Friday. "The US government has repeatedly attempted to engage Syrian officials to seek Austin's release," Pompeo said in a statement on the eighth anniversary of Tice's disappearance.

"President Trump wrote to Bashar Assad in March to propose direct dialogue." Tice was a freelance photojournalist working for Agence France-Presse, McClatchy News, The Washington Post, CBS and other news organizations when he disappeared after being detained at a checkpoint near Damascus on Aug. 14, 2012.

Thirty-one years old at the time he was captured, Tice appeared blindfolded in the custody of an unidentified group of armed men in a video a month later.

Since then, there has been no official information on whether he is alive or dead.

In March, Trump said the United States had written a letter to authorities in Damascus, without specifying that he himself had written personally to Assad, who Washington wants out of power. At that time, Trump said he did not know if Tice was still alive.

HIGHLIGHT

Tice was a freelance photojournalist working for Agence France-Presse, McClatchy News, The Washington Post, CBS and other news organizations when he disappeared after being detained at a checkpoint near Damascus on Aug. 14, 2012.

"No one should doubt the president's commitment to bringing home all US citizens held hostage or wrongfully detained overseas," Pompeo said Friday. "Nowhere is that determination stronger than in Austin Tice's case."

Pompeo said he and Trump hoped there would be "no need for another statement like this a year from now."

"Austin Tice's release and return home are long, long overdue. We will do our utmost to achieve that goal," he added.

A year ago, the US government said it believed Tice was still alive.

His mother Debra Tice said in January that she had "credible information" to that effect, without elaborating.

In 2018, US authorities announced a \$1 million reward for information that would lead to his recovery.



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[A never-ending eastern Med saga of brinkmanship](#)

Fri, 2020-08-14 23:24

JEDDAH: As tensions between Athens and Ankara continue to run high in their dispute over oil and gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean, it emerged on Friday that a Greek and a Turkish warship were involved in a minor collision on Wednesday.

Analysts said it is unlikely the dispute will escalate as neither side would be willing to risk the political and economic costs. Nevertheless, the war of words continues.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned on Thursday that if any Turkish ships in the disputed eastern Med are attacked, there would be serious consequences.

"We said that if you attack our Oruc Reis (a Turkish research vessel that began looking for oil and gas on Monday) you will pay a high price, and they got their first answer today," said Erdogan, apparently in reference to the collision between the warships.

His comments came hours after Greek and French military forces conducted exercises in the vicinity of Crete, close to the location where the Oruc Reis is operating, accompanied by a military escort.

In an attempt to gain international support for its claims in the maritime dispute with Turkey, Greek foreign minister Nikos Dendias met 27 EU foreign ministers and US secretary of state Mike Pompeo in Vienna on Friday for urgent talks about the rising military tensions.

So far, only France has provided tangible support for the Greek cause, by sending two warships to the region and staging the joint military exercises.

Ankara, meanwhile, is lobbying German Chancellor Angela Merkel and EU Council President Charles Michel.

So far, the only action the EU has taken over the Turkish drilling activity is to impose sanctions on two energy-company executives in the country.

SPEEDREAD

Turkey warned on Thursday that any attack on a Turkish ship drilling in disputed East Mediterranean shores would bring a 'high price.'

"Although it appears to be a major crisis between Greece and Turkey, as they are seemingly at the brink of war, the situation will not escalate beyond what it already is," said Paul Antonopoulos, an expert on Turkish-Greek relations.

He added that the dispute with Greece has been manufactured by Ankara, along with Turkey's activities in Syria and Libya, to distract the Turkish population from their country's dire economic situation. The lira is trading at more than 7.30 to the dollar, the unemployment rate has reached 24.6 percent and the prices of fuel and other commodities are rising.

"Greece is not interested in a war and will continue on a path of diplomatically isolating Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean, which it has thus far successfully done," said Antonopoulos. "While Greece has gotten firm support to oppose Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean from France, Cyprus, the EU, Israel, Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Turkey remains completely isolated and will likely soon face sanctions that could escalate the economic situation."

A maritime border deal signed last week by Greece and Egypt added another layer of tension as it includes an area claimed by Ankara as part of a controversial deal with Libya's Government of National Accord. Turkey

dismissed the agreement between Greece and Egypt as “null and void”.

Despite the strong rhetoric and posturing from both Athens and Ankara, Antonopoulos reiterated that the dispute is unlikely to escalate into open hostilities. A conventional war with Greece would be a completely different scenario from Turkey’s interventions in Syria and Libya, he added, and the final nail in the coffin of the Turkish economy.

However, the next crisis in the saga is looming, if Ankara goes ahead with its previously announced plans to issue gas-exploration licenses for the area. Antonopoulos said that any additional EU sanctions could further weaken the Turkish economy and give Erdogan an excuse to create another crisis that will distract the Turkish people from their nation’s economic problems.

Meanwhile two US senators and two members of Congress urged Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to encourage Turkey to end its drilling plans, on the grounds that they risk an escalation that would jeopardize American strategic interests and create challenges to regional cooperation and US-Turkey ties.



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Erdogan says only solution in Mediterranean is dialogue
Former Pentagon official calls for US to confront Turkey in Eastern Mediterranean

15 years on from Israeli withdrawal, Gazans frustrated by lack of progress

Fri, 2020-08-14 23:05

GAZA CITY: Saad Al-Farra was among the thousands of Palestinians who rejoiced at the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip on 2005, but today he appears pessimistic and frustrated.

“We did not know that the occupation would (leave), and that division, corruption, poverty and unemployment would come in its place.” Al-Farra who was a farmer on land owned by his family adjacent to an Israeli settlement in the Gush Qatif settlement, south of the strip, told Arab News

The majority of Palestinians living in Gaza believed that their lives would improve after 38 years of occupation when, on Aug. 15, 2005, Israel began implementing its “unilateral disengagement plan” from the small coastal strip, which has an area of roughly 360 square kilometers. Israel evacuated 21 settlements inhabited by around 6,000 settlers, which had taken up around 35 percent of the Gaza Strip.

But for Al-Farra, and many others, that optimism has turned to frustration at the subsequent deterioration in the quality of Gaza residents’ lives.

“Nobody prefers the occupation. But our reality is worse than it was before the Israeli withdrawal. What have we done since?” he asked, clearly angry. “We fought, divided, and dispersed, and our youth scattered and emigrated. And many of them died in the sea (trying) to escape from Gaza.”

He continued: “We used to think that we were liberated from the occupation, and we did not know that we would remain besieged by the occupation from the land, sea and air, and besieged by our own division and disagreement. Everything has deteriorated – in all aspects of life. There is no work or electricity.”

Since Israel tightened its blockade in mid-2007, after Hamas took control of the strip by force, Gaza has been subject to a stifling electricity crisis, and an unprecedented rise in poverty and unemployment.

“Israel has not actually withdrawn, as it is still controlling all aspects of life,” said Samir Abu Mdallala, professor of economics at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, adding that although Israel had withdrawn settlers from Gaza, its control over the strip’s residents remained such that “it is able to count the breathing of the Gazans.”

FASTFACT

The majority of Palestinians living in Gaza believed that their lives would improve after Israel began implementing its disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip. But that optimism has turned to frustration at the subsequent deterioration in the quality of Gaza residents' lives.

As a result of Israel's blockade, its control of the sea and commercial crossings, and its ban on both the majority of exports from Gaza and many imports – including raw materials, economic conditions have worsened dramatically, leading many residents into despair, Abu Mdallala suggested.

Professor of political science Mukhaimer Abu Saada referenced an old statement by the Israeli National Security Adviser during the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza – in which he framed the withdrawal as a way to block the establishment of an independent, interconnected Palestinian state – and suggested that the current dismal state of affairs is what Israel intended all along.

“Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza, but it was killing Gaza by blocking all other methods,” Abu Saada said.

The professor does not blame Israel alone for the current situation in Palestine as a whole, however. Like Al-Farra, he stresses the damage done by Palestinian leaders themselves, who have failed to present a united front.

“It was possible to (deal with) the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in a better way,” he said. “But what the Palestinians did was the exact opposite. They devoted themselves to internal battles.”

Political analyst Hani Habib agrees that the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and, before that, the Oslo Accords of the early Nineties, offered the Palestinians an opportunity: “Can they manage their affairs by themselves?”

Habib told Arab News: “We showed the world our inability to manage ourselves by ourselves and the experience of governance in Gaza is the greatest proof.”

Hamas MP Atef Adwan acknowledged that the Palestinians have failed politically to make the most of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, but said that the reality of the Arab region, which he described as “flabby,” and ongoing international bias towards Israel were among the reasons for that failure.

But Adwan claimed that some positive results have been achieved following the withdrawal. Specifically, “developing the resistance” and achieving “self-sufficiency in some crops” thanks to agricultural projects on the land once occupied by Israeli settlements.



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Israel halts fuel shipments to Gaza over fire balloon launches Israel strikes Hamas positions in Gaza over fire balloons