

# Syrian pound plummets as new US sanctions loom

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BEIRUT: Syria's pound hit record lows on the black market Saturday trading at over 2,300 to the dollar, less than a third of its official value, traders said, ahead of new US sanctions.

Three traders in Damascus told AFP by phone that the dollar bought more than 2,300 Syrian pounds for the first time, though the official exchange rate remained fixed at around 700 pounds to the greenback.

After nine years of war, Syria is in the thick of an economic crisis compounded by a coronavirus lockdown and a dollar liquidity crunch in neighboring Lebanon.

Last month, the central bank warned it would clamp down on currency "manipulators."

Analysts said concerns over the June 17 implementation of the US Caesar Act, which aims to sanction foreign persons who assist the Syrian government or help in post-war reconstruction, also contributed to the de fact devaluation. Zaki Mehchy, a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House, said foreign companies – including from regime ally Russia – were already opting not to take any risks.

With money transactions requiring two to three weeks to implement, "today's transactions will be paid after June 17," he said.

Heiko Wimmen, Syria project director at the conflict tracker Crisis Group, said that with the act coming into force, "doing business with Syria will become even more difficult and risky."

Both analysts said the fall from grace of top business tycoon Rami Makhlouf despite being a cousin of the president was also affecting confidence.

"The Makhlouf saga is spooking the rich," Wimmen said.

After the Damascus government froze assets of the head of the country's largest mobile phone operator and slapped a travel ban on him, the wealthy feel "nobody is safe," he said.

They are thinking "you better get your assets and perhaps yourself out preparing for further shakedowns," he said.

Mehchy said the impact of the pound's decline and ensuing price hikes on Syrians would be "catastrophic."

Most of Syria's population lives in poverty, according to the United Nations, and food prices have doubled over the past year.

The UN food agency's Jessica Lawson said any further depreciation risked increasing the cost of imported basic food items such as rice, pasta and lentils.

"These price increases risk pushing even more people into hunger, poverty and food insecurity as Syrians' purchasing power continues to erode," the World Food Programme spokeswoman said.

“Families may be forced to cut the quality and quantity of food they buy.”



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## [Palestinians, Arabs 'must learn lessons of Naksa'](#)

Sat, 2020-06-06 00:46

AMMAN: Leading Palestinian and Arab figures have used the 53rd anniversary of Naksa – the displacement and occupation of Arab territories that followed Israel's victory in the 1967 war against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan – to highlight political mistakes made during and after the conflict.

Adnan Abu-Odeh, political adviser to Jordan's King Hussein and King Abdullah II, told Arab News that Arab countries and the Palestinian leadership had

failed to understand the goals of Zionism.

"Governments that participated in the war were naive, expecting a repeat of the 1956 Sinai invasion when the US ordered an Israeli withdrawal. This was followed by the mistaken belief that we could liberate the land using guerrilla warfare," he said.

Anees Sweidan, director-general of foreign relations in the PLO, told Arab News that the Palestinian cause is undergoing a complicated phase where political opportunities are limited.

"The US bias towards Israel and absence of unity has put the Palestinian movement in a difficult situation. It is harder to generate external support and the financial crunch is causing much suffering despite the fact that we have made important accomplishments in the UN and Europe."

Abdalqader Husseini, chairperson of the Faisal Husseini Foundation, said that the opportunities the anniversary offers should not be ignored.

"We need to realize that this is an illegal occupation that continues to dig deeper and escalate every day to the degree that the international community has lost interest and world conscience has become numb to Israeli practices. We in Jerusalem have not normalized with the occupiers and we have not accepted the new situation as an inescapable reality that we must accept."

Jordanian MP Kais Zayadin said that the biggest mistake Arab countries made was to trust that the occupying state would make peace and reach a lasting solution to the Palestinian cause.

"We went to Madrid with hope, the Palestinian leadership went to Oslo with optimism that they could reach a phased solution that would lead to statehood. As we remember this Naksa, we must revisit the path that has allowed the occupying entity to steal our land and cause havoc to our people without any deterrence from the international community," he said.

Nibal Thawabteh, director of the Bir Zeit University's Media Development Center, said the biggest mistake since 1967 was focusing on politics and avoiding community development.

"We don't have a strong sense of citizenship, some have become accustomed to religious Islam. We need to work more on the citizenship."

Ahmad Awad, director of the Amman-based Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, said there is a lack of acknowledgment of the reasons behind the Arab loss.

"Political, economic and cultural factors caused our loss, and we feel that most Arab countries have not learned this lesson. Instead of learning, we are going backwards, failing to defend their existential rights, shifting to isolationism as well as cultural and economic regression in our region."

Instead of looking backward, some Palestinians wanted to look forward.

Mahdi Abdulhadi, head of the PASSIA thinktank in Jerusalem, said that Palestinian youth who never felt the shock of the 1967 defeat but have seen the exposure of Arab regimes in the face of the “deal of the century” will prevail.

“They personify the meaning of steadfastness for dignity, and they have the will to protect our heritage, our identity, and our holy places.”

Lily Habash, a Exeter University political science graduate, told Arab News that things look different on the ground.

“The world is changing and Israel uses geopolitical and regional changes to its advantage,” she said.

Dangers today encourage despair but Palestinians will be steadfast in the long term, she added.

“Some say we need a savior to get us out of this dilemma but I believe we need to trust in ourselves and work on all fronts.”



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# Protests set to resume in Lebanon but activists are no longer united

Author:

Sat, 2020-06-06 01:06

BEIRUT: Lebanon is gearing up for the biggest street protests in months, after the coronavirus pandemic stifled the popular movement that kicked off in October last year.

Activists have called on people from all walks of life to gather in downtown Beirut on Saturday to protest against the continuing deterioration in living conditions. However, many civil-society groups that took part in the previous demonstrations have announced that they do not intend to do so this time. The enthusiasm of the public seems to be waning, even as the economic crises people are facing increase.

A few activists not affiliated with any organized protest groups assembled in Martyrs' Square, in the heart of Beirut, on the eve of the rally.

"We are here to say that we still hold our positions on the failed power that has brought us to a worsening economic and social situation," said Nazih Khalaf. "However, this time activists are divided; each group has its own opinion. This can be seen on social-media platforms. I fear that people will not take to the streets on Saturday."

Ghina Jamil, a teacher of students with special needs, said: "I am independent and I want the governing authority to hear my voice. I do not care who the ruling class is; what I care about is getting my rights. I have two options: go onto the street and protest, or stay home and die of hunger and the taxes that burden us.

"I do not bet on people anymore. The government, shielding itself under the guise of a technocrat cabinet, managed to deflate protesters' anger while the coronavirus outbreak brought the demonstrations to a screeching halt and stifled the popular movement, allowing the authorities to attract people by playing the card of sectarian strife."

While those activists who remain motivated are preparing for the demonstration so, too, are the security services tasked with maintaining order in the heart of the capital. They have increased the barricades of barbed wire and iron doors blocking the way to the Lebanese parliament. Meanwhile, owners of those shops that remain in business are closing their doors in fear of possible riots.

On Friday night, protesters waved placards with slogans calling for early parliamentary elections, announcing that "there is no confidence in the ruling elite," demanding "the recovery of looted money and fight corruption," and complaining about increasing prices and the high exchange rate of the dollar.

There is a big difference between the popular uprising last October and this latest protest, according to Nizar Hassan, a researcher in social movements. "The Oct. 17 uprising is over and we will not return to the previous



situation," he said. "It is a pity that the political class used the three-month grace period (caused by the pandemic) to restore political divisions. "The first uprising united people of different sects, doctrines and ideologies around common demands – the authority is now trying to cause a rift between them.

"Past events are causing collective frustration and people no longer have the same beliefs they had on Oct. 17. They have chosen to coexist with what does not currently satisfy them."

Hassan noted that one activists' group demands the disarmament of Hezbollah but, he said, this "is not, in my opinion, an urgent demand today, and it will not affect the economic reality Lebanon is facing."

On the contrary, he said, demands for the implementation of UN Security Resolution 1559, which calls for free and fair elections in Lebanon and the withdrawal of all foreign forces, prompted Hezbollah and its supporters to launch a violent campaign against the civil movement, accusing its participants of being Israeli agents and depicting them as being opposed to the resistance.

"I do not rule out the presence of security agencies working as part of this, because this led to the withdrawal of many groups, including those close to Hezbollah, from participation in the upcoming protest," Hassan added.

"Some wealthy groups entered the civil movement as well and demanded a date for early parliamentary elections. When we called on Oct. 17 for early elections, it was one of many demands related to establishing a new election law – otherwise what is the point of holding elections under the current election law? This would simply recreate the same authority and give opportunistic groups the chance to exploit it to their advantage."

Hassan said he still expects "a good number" of activists to take to the streets of Beirut on Saturday, but predicted that they will be making contradictory demands and tensions might flare as a result.

"I know that within each activist group there are two perspectives, which will lead to confusion," he added.

Among those who have declared that their supporters will not participate in Saturday's protest is MP Chamel Roukoz, the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun. He is not currently a member of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement or its parliamentary bloc because "it gives priority to early parliamentary elections, whereas we want to modify the current election law because it leads to rich businessmen controlling the parliament."

He added: "If the protesters want to overthrow the ruling elite I will not support them, because the responsibility lies with the government and the parliament, since the powers of the president of the republic are limited."

Roukoz urged those who demonstrate this weekend "not to adopt provocative slogans, and to avoid problems between them and the security forces."

There were already some signs of rising tensions in Beirut's Tariq Al-Jdideh on Friday. An existing dispute was blamed for a confrontation between young men armed with sticks, knives and machetes, during which shots were fired into the air. A number of shops and organizations in the area closed, fearing violence would escalate. An Internal Security Forces patrol and intelligence and army forces were dispatched to the scene and began an investigation.

The dollar exchange rate in Beirut on Friday was between LBP3,890 and LBP3,940, according to a daily statement issued by the Syndicate of Money

Changers in Lebanon.

Money changers are expected to decrease the price of the dollar to LBP3200 in the next 10 days, in response to a Central Bank demand.



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## [Cairo mosque resumes Friday prayers with pandemic plea](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-06-05 23:29

CAIRO: Friday prayers returned to Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque, 66 days after being suspended as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Ahmed Hashem, a member of the Senior Scholars Committee in Al-Azhar, was the khatib, or preacher, for the first Friday prayers since the shutdown.

Only 20 worshippers from among the mosque's imams and employees took part in

the prayers. Regular worshippers were absent in line with virus restrictions.

“To all those working in the medical force, from doctors to nurses, work sincerely and know that in your work of treating the sick, you are conducting the best form of worship,” Hashem said during his sermon, addressing health-care workers.

“What we experienced with this pandemic, and being unable to find a cure despite the genius of modern science, is an indication that this universe has God,” he added.

The Friday prayer was broadcast on Egyptian TV and on Al-Azhar’s social media platforms.

Hashem told journalists earlier that praying in Al-Azhar Mosque was a good omen, saying he prayed to God to “lift the pandemic off humanity as a whole.”

A member of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars said that it was common knowledge among scholars that in Al-Azhar Mosque, prayers are answered.

Shoukry El-Gendy, undersecretary of the Religious Affairs Committee in Parliament, said the return of prayers in mosques will depend on worshippers following social distancing, especially in large venues.

Egypt’s mosques will follow protective guidelines when they reopen, with worshippers wearing face masks, keeping a safe distance and each having their own prayer mat.

The Friday prayers were the first to be held in Al-Azhar Mosque since the Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, sheikh of Al-Azhar, temporarily stopped public prayers on March 21 to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The Ministry of Endowments confirmed that the next Friday prayer, on June 12, will be held in the Imam Hussein Mosque, and will include around 20 mosque employees and endowment workers.

The ministry would not provide any information on when daily prayers will be held in mosques across Egypt.

The Council of Ministers said that a coronavirus crisis management committee meeting next week will make a decision on the reopening of mosques. The committee is responsible for ensuring that government instructions on the virus are being implemented.

This was not the first time Al-Azhar Mosque stopped worshippers congregating. During the era of the Ayyubid state (1174-1250 AD), Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi overthrew the Fatimids at a time when the mosque was neglected.

During the rule of Egypt’s Ayyubid dynasty, Sadr Al-Din bin Derbas, a judge appointed by Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi, was prohibited from praying in it. Al-Hakim Mosque became the only mosque in which congregational prayers, including the Friday prayer and khutbah, took place.





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## [Crackdown on Turkish opposition accelerates: Sign of a snap election?](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-06-05 23:20

ISTANBUL: Three opposition MPs in Turkey were expelled from office on Thursday night and detained on espionage and terrorism charges in a move many see as being designed to weaken opposition parties ahead of a likely snap election.

Enis Berberoglu, from the main opposition Republican People's party (CHP), and Leyla Guven and Musa Farisiogullari from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) were all expelled, thus losing their parliamentary immunity. Berberoglu was arrested at his home in Istanbul during the night,

while the two HDP MPs were arrested in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir.

Opposition MPs reportedly chanted slogans calling the ruling government fascist, "putschist," and "the enemy of democracy."

"This is yet another sign that the Islamist-nationalist coalition ruling President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's presidency will harden its authoritarianism as it continues to lose democratic legitimacy," Murat Somer, a political scientist from Koc University in Istanbul, told Arab News. "It tries to kill three birds with one stone."

CHP MP Berberoglu, a journalist, was sentenced to five years and 10 months in prison in 2018 for providing another journalist with footage that appeared to show that the National Intelligence Agency was providing arms to Syrian rebels in 2014. His sentence was on hold because of his parliamentary immunity.

The HDP parliamentarians have been charged with "membership of a terrorist organization" because of their alleged links to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Earlier this week, the HDP asked for an official probe into the cost of Turkey's involvement in the Libyan conflict and urged the government to focus on dealing with domestic issues.

The government's increasing crackdown on opposition parties is a result of its waning power domestically – where it faces an unprecedented economic crisis and rising unemployment – Somer and others suggest.

According to Somer, the latest arrests are not only an attempt to restrict democratic opposition by criminalizing it but also to drive a wedge between pro-Kurdish opposition parties and the rest. They are also a warning to potential dissidents inside the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

"All this is yet another step in the ongoing struggle between those who want to consolidate an authoritarian presidential system and a still-divided yet dynamic opposition (aiming) to revive democracy," he said.

The crackdown on the HDP is expected to push the pro-Kurdish party to adopt a more radical standpoint that could make any electoral alliance difficult to sell to CHP voters.

Alpay Antmen, an attorney and a CHP MP, said the arrests are intended to shift people's focus away from Turkey's economic turmoil and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the main opposition party were about to launch a campaign across 19 of Turkey's hardest-hit cities to listen to the views of local citizens.

"The ruling government tries to restrict the opposition parties' efforts to reach out to the citizens and to help them recover (financially). But whatever they do, it gives us further enthusiasm for our nationwide projects," Antmen told Arab News.

Director of Human Rights Watch Turkey Emma Sinclair-Webb also criticized the move, describing it as "another sign of the relentless assault on elected

opposition parties,” and added that the three lawmakers had been subjected to “politically motivated trials in which legal activities were criminalized.”



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