

'Who controls Lebanon's destiny?' asks former president

Author:

Sat, 2020-02-22 00:43

BEIRUT: Former Lebanese President Amine Gemayel asked: "Who controls power now in Lebanon? Is it the legitimate authority, or illegitimate armed groups? Who controls Lebanon's destiny? Is it legitimate armed institutions, or illegitimate ones – whether Hezbollah or any other group?"

Gemayel added that the state is "searching for solutions away from legal and financial ones related to the well-being of the country, by (working) alongside the Central Bank of Lebanon to nurture the treasury and financing its expenditure from private bank deposits of residents or expatriates." Gemayel also complained about "the absence of good governance and total absence of the political authority with regards to handling the current crisis in Lebanon," noting the "indifference of many states, and the lack of interest of brotherly and friendly states in helping Lebanon under the current government and situation."

Lebanon's ongoing crisis is set to worsen in the near future, with a \$1.2 billion Eurobond due on March 9. Its total debt is around \$30 billion, divided between banks and investment funds.

On Wednesday, Lebanon formally requested technical assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to tackle its economic crisis. Minister of Finance Ghazi Wazni said meetings with an IMF delegation in Beirut are still in their "consultative stage to help Lebanon set a rescue plan."

His media office said: "Deliberations are taking into consideration all available data and possible options based on the delegation's evaluation of the situation in Lebanon."

Wazni claimed: "Lebanon has set a plan to face and resolve the crisis, and (has asked) that the IMF give its point of view in light of the current situation regarding the challenges and ways to overcome them, in addition to the economic and financial reforms that Lebanon needs."

Twelve legal and financial consulting firms have reportedly made offers to give advice on the best options to restructure Lebanon's debt and prepare for negotiations with creditors.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun told Ján Kubis, the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, "Solutions are in place to resolve the financial and economic crisis in collaboration with the IMF."

According to Aoun's media office, "The measures that will be adopted aim at protecting the finances of Lebanon and the rights and interests of its citizens."

FASTFACT

On Wednesday, Lebanon formally requested technical assistance from the IMF to tackle its economic crisis.

Kubis urged the Lebanese authorities to implement the promised reforms and gave his assurance that the UN “supports the reforms that the government intends to undertake.”

Prime Minister Hassan Diab said: “The crisis that we are passing through today is unprecedented in the history of Lebanon – even in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Lebanese Pound faced sharp decline, the situation was different. Lebanon is going through a turning point in its history and our government is working day and night to find solutions within 30 days to a 30-year crisis.”

As the government is reportedly considering postponing the payment of the Eurobond and negotiating a restructuring of its debt, the exchange rate of the dollar to the LBP remains as high as LBP2,450 or 2,500 for \$1 in exchange offices, while the official exchange rate remains LBP1,515 for \$1.

The Lebanese Bakeries and Ovens Unions warned on Friday of “new burdens due to the increase of the US Dollar exchange rate,” and called on the state to “satisfy the country’s wheat needs, as citizens cannot bear more pressure.”

Nicolas Chammas, president of the Beirut Traders Association, expressed the concern and anger of the commercial sector regarding the Lebanese political class. “Ever since the war in Syria erupted nine years ago, our situation has been in steady decline due to displacement, smuggling, unfair competition and mismanagement by the state,” he said. “One week before protests erupted, more than 100,000 merchants staged sit-ins in front of their shops and (gave warnings about) the serious situation they were passing through.”

The protests, he claimed, “have exacerbated our problems due to the impossibility of transferring money, and restrictions on bank deposits which made us strive for survival.”

On the streets, tensions were again running high this week, as supporters of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) staged a protest in front of the Central Bank in Hamra Street. FPM demonstrators clashed with supporters of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) for the first time – due to rumors that the FPM supporters intended to move their protest to the nearby house of PSP leader Walid Jumblatt – before the army intervened to separate the two sides. Jumblatt later asked his supporters to disperse.



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Lebanon confirms first coronavirus case as death toll hits 4 in Iran 'Social explosion' in Lebanese camps imminent, warn officials

[Jordanians voice anger at Mideast peace plan](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-02-22 00:29

AMMAN: Widespread protests against the US Mideast peace plan continued for a fifth Friday in Jordan with Palestinians, Jordanians and other nationals massing on Jordan's streets to voice their support for Palestine.

Hundreds of protesters responded to a call to defeat the so-called "deal of the century" by gathering outside the US Embassy in Amman and chanting slogans, such as "Jerusalem is a red line; the deal of the century will disappear forever; Amman is the twin city of Jerusalem; and we will not mortgage ourselves to the occupation and become partners in the crime."

Murad Adaileh, secretary-general of the Islamic Action Front, told Arab News that Jordanians traveled from around the country to join protests against US President Donald Trump's peace deal.

"This plan and those who adopted it are against Jordan and its people. This morning Jordanians came out in their thousands for the dawn prayers to express their commitment not to give up on our holy places," he said. In Palestine, thousands gathered at Al-Aqsa Mosque during pre-dawn prayers to stage a seventh Friday of demonstrations. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, a member of the Islamic Waqf in Jerusalem, said that protests "cemented the Palestinian identity and ensured the transfer of the sacred trust to the new generation."

HIGHLIGHT

Hundreds of protesters responded to a call to defeat the so-called 'deal of the century' by gathering outside the US Embassy in Amman and chanting slogans warning that 'Jerusalem is a red line.'

"Fear has been defeated and people are willing to bear the responsibility and result of the protests," he added.

"These morning prayers in Naser Mosque in Nablus, the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron and in Jenin, Qalqilya and other locations show the unity of the people and their communal message of steadfastness and resistance with dignity," he told Arab News.

In Gaza, protests were held after Friday prayers in many locations.

Talal Abu Tharifeh, a leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, said the protests highlighted Palestinian unity. "These protests in which Islamic and national forces are combined reflect the unity of the people in rejecting the Trump-Netanyahu vision."

Firas Abadi, head of the Shury Party, said that the message to the US and Israel is that "this plan will not pass."

"The public is aware and willing to sacrifice for the Palestinian cause."

In the northern Jordanian city of Irbid hundreds protested after the Friday prayer by chanting "This is a treasonous and shameful plan and that some countries have conspired against Jordan and Palestine," he added.

In Jordan's Zarqa city, protesters came out in large numbers to voice their anger at a Jordanian gas deal with Israel.

"From Zarqa, we are all willing to sacrifice for Al-Aqsa," they chanted.

Hamzeh Mansour, the Islamic Movement leader, said: "From Ramtha to Aqaba, the Palestinian blood has mingled with Jordanian blood. We are all committed to stopping this dangerous chapter of the Palestinian cause in which Jerusalem, refugees and the Palestinian state all have been denied their rights."



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Israel bans Palestinian agricultural exports via Jordan
Palestinian leaders hit back at Kushner claims Palestine to blame for West Bank violence

[Libya cease-fire talks in 'right direction,' says UN envoy](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-02-22 00:20

GENEVA / MOSCOW: Cease-fire talks between Libya's warring sides are going in the "right direction" while hitting hurdles over violations of an arms embargo and a truce declared last month, the UN envoy for Libya Ghasan Salame told Reuters on Friday.

Salame, in an interview during a break in military talks in Geneva, said that he expected political-level talks to convene in the Swiss city on Feb. 26 but was already working on confidence-building measures.

"In parallel we are trying to make air travel a bit safer in Libya especially from Mitiga as well as Misrata. We are also trying to reopen the port to be a safe harbor," Salame said. "And we are also trying ... to help in an exchange of prisoners between the parties."

A day earlier, Salame had said that his mission to secure a lasting cease-fire and eventually a political solution was "very difficult" but "possible."

Haftar warns Turkey

Libya's eastern commander, Gen. Khalifa Haftar, vowed on Friday to fight Turkish forces if peace talks in Geneva failed, in comments to a Russian news agency.

The eastern military commander, who is backed by Russia, gave the interview to RIA Novosti after meeting Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on Wednesday.

"If talks in Geneva do not achieve peace and security for our country, if mercenaries do not return to where they were brought from, the armed forces will fulfill their constitutional obligations ... to defend against the Turkish Ottoman invaders," Haftar said in translated comments.

Talks between the warring parties in Geneva ended earlier this month with no result.

If talks in Geneva do not achieve peace and security for our country, the armed forces will fulfill their constitutional obligations ... to defend against the Turkish Ottoman invaders.

Gen. Khalifa Haftar, Libya's eastern commander

A second round began Tuesday, but broke down after rocket fire hit a port in Tripoli. Talks then resumed Thursday.

The country has been mired in chaos since 2011 when a NATO-backed uprising led to the killing of longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi. Haftar launched an offensive to capture Tripoli in April.

Turkey supports the UN-recognized government in Tripoli led by Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj, with whom Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in November signed a deal on security, maritime and military cooperation.

"As we've said, our patience is at the limit due to the regular violations of the cease-fire by groups of fighters hired by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Libyan Prime Minister Sarraj," Haftar said, accusing them of failing to fulfill promises they made in Berlin.

At a Berlin summit last month, countries including Russia, Turkey, France and Egypt agreed to end foreign interference in Libya and respect a UN arms embargo.

Haftar added that his forces "are assessing the situation in Tripoli, are in contact with the international sides and are ready for all options."

Moscow and Ankara together brokered a tenuous truce in Libya last month. The two sides agreed to end fighting, but the cease-fire has been violated.

Haftar said Friday that his conditions for a cease-fire were "withdrawal of Syria and Turkish mercenaries, Turkey stopping supplies of weapons to Tripoli and the liquidation of terrorist groups."



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Libya's Haftar says any cease-fire would be contingent on Turkish withdrawal
UN-backed Sarraj: Support for Haftar 'prolonging' Libyan war

[‘Social explosion’ in Lebanese camps imminent, warn officials](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-21 01:33

BEIRUT: Authorities are battling to prevent “a social explosion” among Palestinian refugees crammed into camps in Lebanon, a top official has revealed.

Fathi Abu Al-Ardat, secretary of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) factions in Lebanon, told Arab News that urgent measures were being put in place to try and stop the “crisis” situation getting out of control.

“Conditions in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are very difficult due to the economic crisis facing the country, and we are trying to delay a social explosion in the camps and working on stopgap solutions,” he said.

And Dr. Hassan Mneimneh, the head of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), said: "More Palestinian refugees from the camps in Lebanon are immigrating. Embassies are receiving immigration requests, and Canada is inundated with a wave of immigration because its embassy has opened doors to applications."

According to a population census conducted in 2017 by the Central Administration of Statistics in Lebanon, in coordination with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), there are 174,422 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon spread across 12 camps and nearby compounds.

Mneimneh insisted the figure was accurate despite the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) estimating there to be 459,292 refugees in the country. He said: "The census we had conducted refers to the current reality in Lebanon."

He added that he feared "increased pressure on European donor countries over UNRWA in the coming days after the unilateral implementation of the 'Deal of the Century' (the US peace plan for the Middle East) by Israel.

"Israel's goal is to undermine UNRWA's mission as a prelude to ending the Palestinian cause and, thus, preventing the return of Palestinians."

Mneimneh held a meeting on Wednesday with two Lebanese and Palestinian action groups in Lebanon to discuss Palestinian asylum issues in light of the American peace plan. There were no representatives of Hezbollah or Hamas present at the talks.

He said: "This deal kick-starts an unusual stage that carries the most serious risks not only to the Palestinian people and cause, but also to the other countries and entities in the Arab region.

"The first of these is Lebanon, which senses the danger of this announcement in view of the clauses it contains to eliminate the Palestinian cause, including the refugee issue and the possibility of their settlement in the host countries."

Al-Ardat said: "Palestinian refugees have no choice but to withstand the pressures on them to implement the so-called 'Deal of the Century.' What is proposed is that we sell our country for promises, delusions, and \$50 billion distributed to three countries. Palestine is not for sale."

He pointed out that "the camps in Lebanon resorted to family solidarity in coordination with the shops in the camps. Whoever does not have money can go to the shop after two (2 p.m.) in the afternoon and get vegetables for free.

"We have been securing 7,000 packs of bread to distribute in the camps and buying the same amount to sell the pack at 500 liras. But this does not solve the problem."

He added: "The PLO leadership continues to perform its duty toward the refugees and, until now, we have not been affected by the restrictions imposed by banks in Lebanon, and refugees are still receiving medical treatment.

“However, our concern now is that Palestinian refugees do not starve, taking into account all the indications that the situation in Lebanon will not improve soon.

“Twenty percent of the Palestinians in Lebanon receive wages either from UNRWA – as they work there – or from the PLO because they are affiliated with the factions, but 80 percent are unemployed and have no income.”

The meeting hosted by Mneimneh agreed “the categorical rejection of the ‘Deal of the Century’ because it means further erasing the identity existence of the Palestinian people as well as their national rights, especially their right to return and establish their independent state.

“It also means assassinating the Palestinian peoples’ legitimate rights and supporting Israel’s usurpation of international justice and 72 years of Arab struggle.

“The deal includes ambiguous, illegal and immoral approaches that contradict all relevant UN and Security Council resolutions, especially with regard to the establishment of the Palestinian state on the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 and the inalienable right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland and establish their state with Jerusalem as its capital,” a statement on the meeting added.

“UNRWA must remain the living international witness to the ongoing suffering and tragedy of the Palestinian people, and UNRWA must continue to receive support.”

Attendees at the talks also recommended “improving the conditions of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to strengthen the elements of their steadfastness until they return.” This was “based on the Unified Lebanese Vision for the Palestinian Refugees Affairs in Lebanon document, which includes the right to work.”



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Surge in Lebanese crossing into Syria for supplies, new year celebrations
Hundreds of Syrian refugees in Lebanon return home

[In northwest Syria, children tossed about by war and exile](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-21 01:26

DARET EZZA, Syria: Mustafa and Ines were helping their parents load the van once again to flee advancing Syrian troops, when bombardment hit the area and sowed panic on the street.

The 12-year-old boy flinched and leapt onto the truck stacked with rugs and mattresses, followed by his 10-year-old sister, her face contorted by fear.

The scene has become routine for residents of northwestern Syria, where Russian-backed government troops have been conducting a devastating offensive to flush rebels out of their last bastion.

The government has made major gains since December, prompting 900,000 people

to flee their homes and shelters in the thick of winter in the biggest displacement of civilians of the nearly nine-year conflict.

“Our life boils down to this now – bombs and fear,” said the children’s father Abu Mohammed.

The town of Daret Ezza lies west of Syria’s second city Aleppo and close to the border with Turkey that remains firmly closed.

It was only a month ago that, forced on the road by a previous phase of the offensive, he washed up in this hilly region still controlled by jihadists and their rebel allies.

NUMBER

900,000 – people flee their homes and shelters in the thick of winter in the biggest displacement of civilians of the nearly nine-year conflict.

The man in his fifties is originally from the south of Idlib province, which the government forces retook weeks ago, at the beginning of their push north.

“We’re scared for our children, this is what leads us to leave every time,” Abu Mohammed said.

To live in Daret Ezza, his family had to rent a single-room workshop with blackened walls, separated from the concrete yard by nothing but a torn plastic sheet.

“This is what we could afford,” Abu Mohammed said. The family spent the winter coughing and sneezing, he said. In some mountain areas of Idlib and neighboring Aleppo province, the temperature dipped to minus 7 Celsius and several children have died of exposure.

As an estimated 3 million people, half of them children, get cornered in an ever shrinking enclave, aid groups warn of an unprecedented humanitarian emergency.

“The situation is getting worse, fear is growing, we can’t calm the children down when they hear a jet or a bomb,” the father said.

Hiding under a black winter coat and a green woolly hat, Ines is the most traumatized of Abu Mohammed’s four children.

“She freezes completely when the bombardment starts,” her father said.

“I block her ears and tell her ‘Don’t be scared, it’s far away, there won’t be strikes’. But still she screams and cries,” he said.

At night she sleeps with her head under the pillow, so as not to hear the warplanes passing overhead.

Even as the truck got ready to move, Abu Mohammed wasn't sure where his family would sleep next.

"We might spend the night with a cousin who took a tent as he left," he said.

Abu Mohammed said they would head toward Azaz, a town considered safer because it lies on the Turkish border.

The truck is so packed that some will have to endure the ride balancing on top of the pile of mattresses in the back.

A stove, a sewing machine and some cooking pots had to be left behind.

A moving video of a father teaching his three-year-old daughter to treat air strikes and shelling as a game was widely shared on social media this week, drawing more attention to the plight of children in the conflict.

According to Save The Children, at least seven children have died since December from the cold or bad living conditions in the camps for the displaced.

Most of the nearly 1 million people displaced by the offensive on Idlib are women and children, who often have to burn furniture or whatever they can find to keep warm.

The United Nations has called for a cease-fire to help tackle what it has warned could become the worst humanitarian disaster of the war.

But on Wednesday Russia blocked a cease-fire resolution at the UN Security Council.



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Turkey launches operation against Syrian regime troops
Idlib operation 'imminent': Erdogan