

Lebanon MPs call for extra security

Fri, 2020-01-24 00:37

BEIRUT: As Lebanon's new government gets down to business, MPs' biggest concern seems to be their own security.

In the wake of violent protests in the past week, Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri on Thursday asked Lebanese army chief, Gen. Joseph Aoun, to take "exceptional measures" to protect the parliament's surroundings.

The plea to beef up security follows clashes outside the Lebanese parliament and the burning of a photograph of new Prime Minister Hassan Diab near the government's headquarters.

Almost 500 people were injured in Beirut at the weekend after security personnel fired tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets at demonstrators who threw stones, attempted to invade the Parliament building, and attacked bank offices and shops.

The formation of a new government ends months of political deadlock and economic decline following Saad Hariri's resignation as prime minister in October in response to mass protests over corruption and mismanagement.

With the country facing growing unrest, the rising levels of violence represent a stern test for the new government as it completes a ministerial handover.

Parliamentary guards were busy this week erecting concrete walls on roads leading to the parliament.

One military official told Arab News that "safe passage" will be restricted to MPs to prevent a repetition of Nov. 19 clashes when protesters blocked access to the parliament.

Parliament is due to meet on Monday and Tuesday to approve a draft budget for 2020.

Shops and businesses facing the parliament's entrance and access points have borne the brunt of violent protests in recent days.

A manager at a Rolex outlet said: "We haven't decided to close the shop completely yet. We are living day by day. During the day, everything is normal, there's traffic and people, but in the afternoon, protesters take over. We hide the merchandise in a safe place, close the shop, and leave. Today, we decided to cover the glass fronts with steel plates so that they won't be destroyed by protesters."

Protesters used petrol bombs as well as firecrackers for the first time on Wednesday night, according to security personnel.

Jan Kubis, the UN special coordinator in Lebanon, tweeted that some

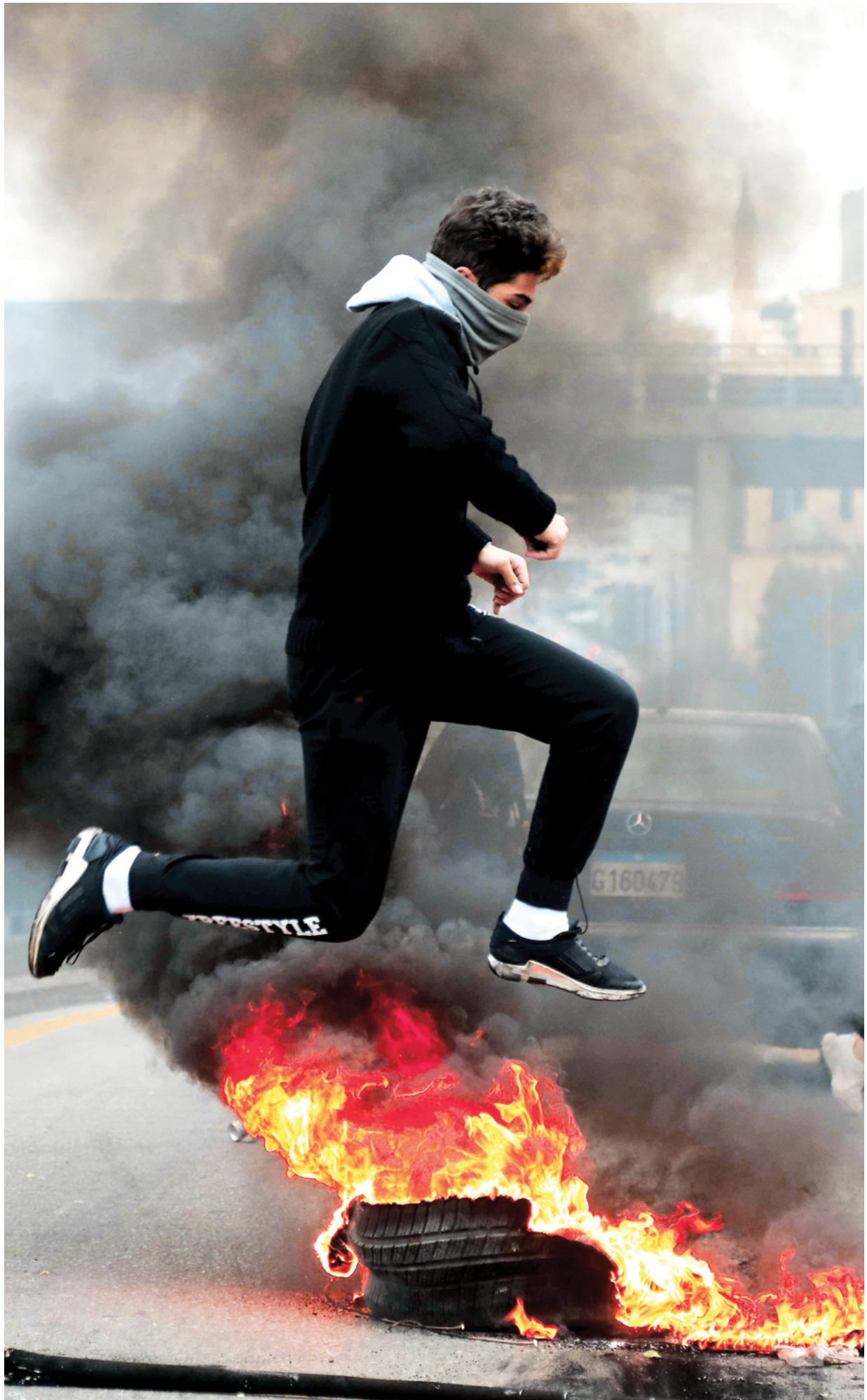
protesters were attempting to “provoke the security forces, undermine civil peace and fuel sectarian strife.”

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said: “Lebanon will face a terrible financial crisis in the coming weeks. We are ready to intervene and provide support, but only to a government committed to reform.

“This is important to the US, but if you look at the protests taking place in Beirut and in cities outside Beirut, you can see, just like in Baghdad, they are not protesting against America, these are protests calling for sovereignty and freedom. The protests taking place in Lebanon today are to tell Hezbollah: Enough is enough.”

The EU described the formation of the Lebanese government as a “fundamental step toward ensuring the country’s ability to address the multiple crises affecting it.” It also urged the government to implement “structural reforms to answer the needs and the expectations of the Lebanese people. Adequate protection must be ensured for the most vulnerable groups in society.”

Ralph Tarraf, EU envoy to Lebanon, said: “We are ready to positively commit to assisting the government if it implements constructive reforms that can improve the government’s performance.”



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Author:

Fri, 2020-01-24 00:28

BEIRUT: Iran has long sought the withdrawal of American forces from neighboring Iraq, but the US killing of an Iranian general and an Iraqi militia commander in Baghdad has added new impetus to the effort, stoking anti-American feelings that Tehran hopes to exploit to help realize the goal.

The Jan. 3 killing has led Iraq's parliament to call for the ouster of US troops, but there are many lingering questions over whether Iran will be able to capitalize on the sentiment.

An early test will be a "million-man" demonstration against the American presence, called for by influential Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr and scheduled for Friday.

It is not clear whether the protesters will try to recreate a New Year's Eve attack on the US Embassy compound in Baghdad by Iran-supported militias in the wake of US airstrikes that killed 25 militiamen along the border with Syria. Iran might simply try to use the march to telegraph its intention to keep up the pressure on US troops in Iraq.

But experts say Iran can be counted on to try to seize what it sees as an opportunity to push its agenda in Iraq, despite an ongoing mass uprising that is targeting government corruption as well as Iranian influence in the country.

"Iran is unconstrained by considerations of Iraqi sovereignty, domestic public opinion, or legality when compared to the Western democracies," said David Des Roches, an expert with The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. "This is Iran's strategic advantage; they should be expected to press it."

A withdrawal of US troops from Iraq would be a victory for Iran, and Tehran

has long pursued a two-pronged strategy of supporting anti-US militias that carry out attacks, as well as exerting political pressure on Iraqi lawmakers sympathetic to its cause. Despite usually trying to keep attacks at a level below what might provoke an American response, Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah fired a barrage of rockets at a military base in Kirkuk in December, killing a US contractor and wounding several US and Iraqi troops.

The US responded first with deadly airstrikes on Iran-affiliated militia bases in western Iraq and Syria, then followed with the Jan. 3 drone attack that killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani, Iran's most powerful military officer, along with Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis as they left Baghdad's airport.

The severity of the US response surprised Iran and others, and it had the unanticipated result of bolstering Tehran's political approach by prompting the Iraqi parliament to pass the resolution calling for the expulsion of all foreign troops from the country.

In response, President Donald Trump has threatened sanctions on Iraq.

"What they want to do is get rid of US troops in what they see as a legitimate political manner," said Dina Esfandiary, a London-based expert with The Century Foundation think tank. "If Iraqis themselves are voting out US troops, it looks a lot better for Iran than if Iran is a puppet master in Iraq trying to get rid of them – and on top of that it would be a more lasting decision."

The legitimacy of the resolution is a matter of dispute. Not only was the session boycotted by Kurdish lawmakers and many Sunnis, but there also are questions of whether Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has the ability to carry it out. Abdul Mahdi resigned in November amid mass anti-government protests but remains in a caretaker role.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo bluntly rejected the call for the troops' removal, instead saying Washington would "continue the conversation with the Iraqis about what the right structure is."

Abdul Mahdi strongly supported the resolution, but since then has said it will be up to the next government to deal with the issue, and there are indications he has been working behind the scenes to help keep foreign troops in the country.

After closed-door meetings with German diplomats last week, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the prime minister had assured them that he had "great interest" in keeping the Bundeswehr military contingent and others part of the anti-Daesh coalition in Iraq.

The US, meantime, said it had resumed joint operations with Iraqi forces, albeit on a more limited basis than before.

Trump met Iraqi President Barham Saleh on Wednesday on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and said Washington and Baghdad have had "a very good relationship" and that the two countries had a "host of

very difficult things to discuss.” Saleh said they have shared common interests including the fight against extremism, regional stability and an independent Iraq.

Asked about the plan for US troops in Iraq, Trump said, “We’ll see what happens.”

In a sign that bodes well for NATO’s continuing mission in the country, Iraq’s deputy foreign minister went to Brussels last week for talks with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on the alliance’s presence in Iraq.

The mixed message of publicly calling for the troops to go but privately wanting them to stay is an indication of Iran’s strong influence, particularly among its fellow Shiite Muslims, Des Roches said.

“For any Iraqi politician in Baghdad – particularly a Shia politician – to defy Iran openly is to risk political as well as physical death,” he said. “So we shouldn’t be surprised if the public and the private lines espoused by Iraqi politicians differ.”

American forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011 but returned in 2014 at the invitation of the government to help battle Daesh after the extremist group seized vast areas in the north and west of the country. A US-led coalition provided crucial air support as Iraqi forces, including Iran-backed militias, regrouped and drove Daesh out in a costly three-year campaign. There are currently some 5,200 American troops in the country.

Even before the drone strike, there were growing calls in nationwide protests across sectarian lines, which started in October centered in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, for the end of all foreign influence in the country. The demonstrations also targeted government corruption and poor public services.

The rejection of Iranian influence over Iraqi state affairs has been a core component of the movement, and pro-Iranian militias have targeted those demonstrations along with Iraqi security forces, killing hundreds and injuring thousands. Protesters fear that with the focus on the push for the US troop withdrawal in response to the attack that killed Soleimani, they may be even easier targets for those forces and that their message will be lost.

“I think Iraq has had enough of having to deal with the Americans and the Iranians alike,” Esfandiary said. “But the assassination of Al-Muhandis, almost more so than Solemani, was such a glaring oversight of sovereignty and of all agreements they had signed on to with the US in terms of the US presence in Iraq, that it has kind of taken some of the attention away from Iran, to Tehran’s delight.”

Friday’s march called for by Al-Sadr is expected to redirect the focus onto the US troops. The cleric, who also leads the Sairoon bloc in parliament, derives much of his political capital through grassroots mobilization.

The Tahrir Square protesters initially rejected that call, saying they want the escalating conflict between Iran and the US off of Iraqi soil.

Since then, Al-Sadr has reached out to them directly, saying the demonstrations against the government and against the American troops are “two lights from a single lamp,” and it is not yet clear whether that might convince them to participate in the march.



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[The famous Egyptian city square that shaped a nation's history](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-01-24 00:08

CAIRO: As famous city squares go, few can have played a more prominent role in shaping a country's history than Tahrir Square in Cairo.

Best known for providing the stage for nationwide protests, which led to the ouster of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the public

gathering place is one of the capital's most important sites.

For 18 consecutive days, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators – some reports put the number at millions – descended on the square before Mubarak finally resigned after 30 years in power.

And the anti-Mubarak protests were not the only political demonstrations Tahrir, also known as Martyr Square, has witnessed.

On June 30, 2013, a year after Mohamed Mursi became the Egyptian president, thousands of protesters gathered in the square demanding his resignation.

Following the two mass demonstrations, Tahrir (Liberation) Square, which lies at the midpoint of Cairo, has become not only a significant part of Egyptian history but also a popular tourist attraction.

Directly after the protests, Egyptians and foreigners feared venturing into Tahrir after it gained a reputation for being unsafe, despite a heavy police presence.

Nine years on from its most significant event, the square is now once again bustling with commuters being within walking distance of the Abdel-Moneim Riad bus station and a transport hub.

Tahrir is also home to the Egyptian Museum which houses more than 100,000 artifacts from the country.

The square is overlooked by the downtown branch of The American University in Cairo, one of the most famous international educational institutions in the country and the Arab world. In 2008, the university relocated to New Cairo, in the Fifth Settlement, taking with it a significant amount of traffic.

Renovation work resumed this month in the square, part of which will involve the addition of four rams restored from Karnak Temple's Hall of Celebration in Luxor. They will be placed around an obelisk being moved from Sun Al-Hajar in the east of Egypt.

With the Egyptian Museum due to relocate to Haram, near the Giza pyramids, the future of the square is not clear. But with its history, offices, schools, coffee shops, restaurants, hotels, and timeworn residential buildings, Tahrir Square is guaranteed never to be short of visitors.



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Egypt draws ire with artifacts' move to busy Tahrir Square
Egyptians march on Tahrir Square to mark one year since clashes

[Turkey targets Somalia for oil drilling](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-01-23 01:12

ANKARA: Turkey is to drill for oil off the shores of Somalia after an invitation from the Horn of Africa nation to explore its seas, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said.

Somalia adopted a new petroleum law last week to attract further foreign investment in the energy field, and opened up 15 blocks for oil companies that are willing to explore the country's hydrocarbon potential.

Turkey has been increasing its footprint in Somalia, especially since 2011 when it began providing the country with humanitarian aid to tackle a famine

problem, and is also signing energy and resource deals with African countries.

It will start exploring for gas in the eastern Mediterranean this year after signing a maritime agreement with Libya, and has a deal with Niger to carry out mineral research and exploration activities.

“There is a proposal from Somalia,” Erdogan said on Monday. “They are saying: ‘There is oil in our seas. You are carrying out these operations with Libya, but you can also do them here.’ This is very significant for us.” Turkish engineers are carrying out infrastructure work in Somalia, but contractors are increasingly being targeted in terror attacks.

Local forces have been trained by Turkish officers at a military base that was built by Turkey in the Somali capital Mogadishu.

Ibrahim Nassir, an Africa analyst from Ankara-based think tank Ankasam, said the Somali drilling offer might be payback for some of the reconstruction work and humanitarian aid. But he also suggested that Somalia might be using Turkey as a counterbalance against its regional rivals.

FASTFACT

Turkey has been increasing its footprint in Somalia, especially since 2011 when it began providing the country with humanitarian aid to tackle a famine problem, and is also signing energy and resource deals with African countries.

“The dispute over maritime territory in the Indian Ocean between Kenya and Somalia might result in security risks during drilling activities, and some armed groups may be used to prevent Ankara from proceeding with hydrocarbon exploitation,” he told Arab News.

Jędrzej Czerep, a senior analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, said that Turkish oil extraction from Somalia could be presented as stealing national wealth.

“That would expose the Turks to greater risks both on the mainland and at sea where Al-Shabab is using motor ships. It could also divide the growing Somali diaspora in Istanbul or even radicalize some of its members,” he told Arab News.

An unstable political situation in Somalia could expose Turkey further, according to Atlantic Council senior associate Charles Ellinas. The third Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit is set to be held in April in Turkey.

“It is not just the short term one should be worried about,” he told Arab News. “It is also the longer term. It takes something like 20 years to recover the investment from an oilfield. And during that period oil sales must be maintained. As things stand, with a very unstable political

environment, upheavals in Somalia over such a period are quite likely.”



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Erdogan says Somalia has invited Turkey to explore for oil in its seas
Cyprus: Turkey may have stolen data for latest gas drilling

[US says Hezbollah works for the Iranian regime, not the Lebanese people](#)

Wed, 2020-01-22 23:33

LONDON: Hezbollah works for the Iranian regime and not the Lebanese people, a senior US diplomat said as he urged European countries to impose an outright ban on the group.

Richard Grenell, the ambassador to Germany, made the plea as Lebanon formed a new government made up of ministers nominated by the militant, Iran-backed organization and its allies

The European Union lists Hezbollah's military wing as a banned terrorist

group, but not its political wing, which has been part of Lebanese governments in recent years.

“The EU thus maintains an artificial distinction between Hezbollah’s ‘political wing’ and ‘military wing,’ a division the terror group itself does not recognize,” Grenell said in an opinion article published by Politico. “The EU’s stated intent for creating this false distinction is to preserve an open channel with Hezbollah and its representatives in the Lebanese government,” he added.

“An EU-wide designation of Hezbollah is necessary to deny it the vast European recruiting and fundraising networks it needs to survive.”

Ambassador [@RichardGrenell](#): Hizballah works for the Iranian regime, not the Lebanese people. <https://t.co/9TyHlPGNGXpic.twitter.com/3t1DbaoGvJ>

– Department of State (@StateDept) [January 22, 2020](#)

Grenell said the German parliament last month called on the government to ban the activities of Hezbollah and for the group to be put on the EU’s terrorist list.

The entire Hezbollah organization is designated as a terrorist group by the US, the UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia and Gulf states among others.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last week called on “all nations” to classify Hezbollah as terrorist after the UK said it had added the entire movement to its terrorism blacklist and frozen all its assets.

“Designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization does no harm to US-Lebanese relations, but it does empower the US to disrupt the international criminal networks that help fund Hezbollah’s support for the (Syrian President Bashar) Assad regime and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” he said.

Hezbollah’s large role in the formation of Lebanon’s new government under Prime Minister Hassan Diab is expected to raise concerns over the scale of the group’s hold over the country. The cabinet formed under Prime Minister Hassan Diab is facing mass protests and a dire economic crisis.

Grenell said EU states struggle to reach a consensus on “Hezbollah’s legitimacy due to its political role in Lebanon.”

Washington is “resolute in its efforts to stop the spread of Hezbollah’s terror, but we cannot contain the threat on our own,” he said.



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New government shows Hezbollah 'takeover of Lebanon is complete' Honduras declares Hezbollah a terrorist organization