

Pressure on Hezbollah mounts at home, abroad

Author:

Tue, 2020-01-21 22:05

LONDON: Friday's move by the British Treasury to freeze all Hezbollah assets puts more pressure on the Iran-backed Lebanese group, which is being squeezed at home and overseas.

Following the March 2019 assertion by the British government that it was "no longer able to distinguish between their already banned military wing and the political party," this latest move means anyone conducting financial transactions with Hezbollah could face prosecution.

Prior to Friday's announcement, only the military wing of Hezbollah – not its political arm – had been subject to asset freezing by the British government.

The announcement by the British Treasury was quickly followed by a call from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for "all nations" to follow the British and clamp down on Hezbollah.

The UK joins the US, Japan, Canada and other countries in blacklisting the entire organization.

On Monday, Honduras, Colombia and Guatemala followed suit, adding Hezbollah to their lists of officially designated terrorist organizations.

The British announcement comes amid an upsurge of anti-government protests in Lebanon. Alongside the civil unrest, the country is facing a deepening economic crisis, with experts fearing a collapse of the Lebanese economy.

Matthew Levitt, director of the Counterterrorism Program at the Washington Institute, said the Treasury's move has the potential to make a real impact on Hezbollah's operations.

"The move empowers British intelligence and law enforcement to open investigations any time they gather information that an individual or entity is raising funds for Hezbollah, period," he told Arab News.

"This is a group that engages in covert and overt activity. You now no longer need to prove the money is going to the covert side of the organization."

The move comes at a time when the world is becoming more aware of the terrorist and criminal activities that Hezbollah is engaged in, Levitt said.

He pointed to its 2015 stockpiling of 3 tons of ammonium nitrate in north London, the imprisonment on terrorism charges of Ali Kourani, a New York-based Hezbollah "sleeper" agent, and major money-laundering activities as the types of criminal enterprise that this approach by the Treasury could help prevent.

However, the impact on Hezbollah depends on the way the asset freeze is implemented. If it is done effectively, Levitt said, it will dissuade Hezbollah from using the UK as a base to support its criminal activity.

The move also comes at a time when the group is under increasing financial stress, both in Lebanon and in the money it receives from Iran, which is facing its own deteriorating economic situation.

Chris Doyle, director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, expects European powers to face increasing pressure to follow the UK and clamp down on Hezbollah's financing in their own countries.

He called the original distinction between Hezbollah's military and political arms a "very convenient ruse," and said the Treasury was always going to make this move, pointing to the deteriorating relations between the UK and Iran.

"There was obviously going to come a time when we were going to freeze their assets and make it illegal to do financial business dealings with Hezbollah," Doyle told Arab News.

The move, he said, comes in the wake of six months of increased tensions between Britain and Iran, including the dramatic seizure of a British tanker over the summer.



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Honduras declares Hezbollah a terrorist organizationPompeo calls on

international community to classify Hezbollah a terrorist group

Amnesty International slams new Qatari law restricting freedom of expression

Author:

Tue, 2020-01-21 21:08

LONDON: Amnesty International on Monday expressed concern over a vague new law that threatens to “significantly restrict freedom of expression in Qatar.”

The law, issued by Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, authorizes the imprisonment of “anyone who broadcasts, publishes, or republishes false or biased rumors, statements, or news, or inflammatory propaganda, domestically or abroad, with the intent to harm national interests, stir up public opinion, or infringe on the social system or the public system of the state.”

The law comes just two years after Qatar acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a UN agreement that guarantees individuals the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.

Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty International’s research director for the Middle East, said: “Qatar already has a host of repressive laws, but this new legislation deals another bitter blow to freedom of expression in the country and is a blatant breach of international human rights law.”

She called it “deeply troubling that the Qatari Emir is passing legislation that can be used to silence peaceful critics,” adding: “Qatar’s authorities should be repealing such laws, not adding more of them.”

Under the new law, “biased” broadcasting or publishing can be punished with a fine of over \$25,000 or up to five years in prison.

The new legislation joins laws introduced in 1979 and 2014 that Amnesty International says arbitrarily restrict freedom of expression.



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'dozens of deaths' in Iran protests as regime's Guards give ominous warning

[Russian air strikes in Syria kill 15 civilians: monitor](#)

Author:

Bachir el Khoury with Aaref Watad in Kfar Taal | AFP

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Tue, 2020-01-21 15:44

BEIRUT: Russian air strikes killed at least 15 civilians Tuesday in northwestern Syria, as renewed violence tightened the noose around the country's last major rebel-held bastion and deepened an already dire

humanitarian crisis.

Retaliatory rocket attacks blamed on rebels and jihadists killed three more civilians in the government-held city of Aleppo in northern Syria, state news agency SANA said.

The spike in violence in the neighboring provinces of Aleppo and Idlib follow so far unsuccessful diplomatic attempts to reduce hostilities in the flashpoint region, with the latest truce in theory going into effect less than two weeks ago.

Most of Idlib and parts of Aleppo province are still controlled by factions opposed to President Bashar Assad's regime, including a group that includes onetime members of Al-Qaeda's former Syria franchise.

The Damascus regime, which controls around 70 percent of the country after nearly nine years of war, has repeatedly vowed to recapture the region.

On Tuesday, air strikes by regime-ally Russia on a rebel-held region in Aleppo's western countryside killed eight members of the same family sheltering in a house, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Six children were among those killed in the raid on Kfar Taal village, where three girls already died a day earlier in strikes, according to the Britain-based monitor.

Another seven civilians were killed in Russian air strikes on western Aleppo and a southern region of Idlib.

"Over the past three days, the bombardment on Idlib and its surroundings, including in western Aleppo, has been exclusively Russian," said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman.

"They want to push rebels and jihadists away from the city of Aleppo and from the motorway linking Aleppo to Damascus," Abdel Rahman said.

SANA said rebel rocket fire on Tuesday also killed two women and a child in Aleppo city.

The surge in violence comes despite a cease-fire announced by Russia earlier this month that never really took hold.

Last Thursday, Russia denied launching any combat operations in the region since the start of the cease-fire earlier this month.

Russia has thousands of forces deployed across Syria in support of the army, while a contingent of Russian private security personnel also operates on the ground.

Moscow's military intervention in 2015, four years into the Syrian conflict, helped keep Assad in power and marked a long, bloody reconquest of territory lost to rebels in early stages of the war.

Abdul Rahman said the latest spate in air strikes could be a prelude to a land offensive in western Aleppo, as the regime and its allies continue their drive to shrink the last opposition-held pocket.

"The regime has massed reinforcements on the outskirts of the city of Aleppo," Abdel Rahman said.

The violence in northern Syria is escalating an already dire humanitarian situation, with aid groups warning of displacement on an unprecedented scale. Idlib province alone is home to at least three million people, many of whom are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.

According to the UN humanitarian coordination agency OCHA, almost 350,000 people have fled their homes since December 1, mainly northwards from southern Idlib, which has borne the brunt of the air strikes.

The International Rescue Committee has warned another 650,000 people, mostly

children and women, could be forced from their homes if the violence continues.





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[Libya peace still elusive despite 'small step' in Berlin](#)

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Mon, 2020-01-20 19:32

BERLIN: A peaceful solution to Libya's protracted conflict remains uncertain despite an international agreement struck in Germany, analysts say, as a fragile cease-fire between warring factions brought only a temporary truce. On Sunday in Berlin, world leaders committed to ending all foreign meddling in Libya and to uphold a weapons embargo as part of a broader plan to end the country's conflict.

But overnight Sunday to Monday heavy bombardment again echoed south of Tripoli – the capital of a country that has been in turmoil since the 2011

NATO-backed uprising that killed dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

Since April last year the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli has fought back against an offensive launched by fighters loyal to eastern commander Khalifa Haftar.

GNA leader Fayez Al-Sarraj and Haftar attended the Berlin summit but they refused to meet and the conference failed to get the two rivals to commit to a permanent truce.

The host, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, tried hard to get Sarraj and Haftar to engage in a serious dialogue.

But after the hours-long talks, she had to put on a brave face and admit she had no illusions concerning a peaceful outcome in Libya anytime soon.

"Ensuring that a cease-fire is immediately respected is simply not easy to guarantee," Merkel said.

Echoing Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who took part in the talks, she said the Libyan parties had taken "a small step forward."

Khaled Al-Montassar, a Libyan university professor of international relations, agreed that much still needs to be done.

"Theoretically, the Berlin summit was successful and touched upon all the details and the causes of the Libyan crisis," he said.

"But the mechanisms of implementing the summit's conclusions are still not clear."

The summit was attended by the presidents of Russia, Turkey, France and Egypt, as well as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and UN chief Antonio Guterres.

The main points they agreed to will be put forward as a UN Security Council resolution.

They include a commitment to end foreign interference in Libya, respect for a UN arms embargo, a permanent cease-fire and steps to dismantle numerous militias and armed groups.

European states must now convince Italy to resume naval operations suspended since March 2019 aimed at enforcing the embargo.

Other points agreed in Berlin were a return to a political process under the auspices of the UN, respect for human rights and guarantees to ensure the security of Libya's lucrative oil infrastructure.

The United Nations walked away from the summit satisfied at least with one key development.

The summit saw the formation of a military commission comprising five GNA loyalists and five Haftar delegates who will seek to define ways of consolidating the cease-fire.

The UN mission in Libya had for weeks urged the rival camps to submit names of delegates to such a commission, and its wish was finally answered on Sunday.

The military commission is expected to meet in the coming days, according to the UN, tasked with turning the fragile cease-fire into a permanent truce as requested by the international leaders in Berlin.

The cease-fire was co-sponsored by Russia and Turkey and has broadly held since it went into effect on January 12.

The main goal of the Berlin summit was to end the international divisions concerning Libya.

Although the GNA is recognized by the UN as Libya's legitimate government, the world body's member states do not agree when it comes to the oil-rich

North African country.

Haftar, who insists his military campaign is aimed at battling Islamists, has the support of several countries, including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and France, with some providing him with military and logistical backing. The GNA is backed by Qatar and Turkey, which has recently sent some troops to shore up Sarraj's embattled government.

Moscow is also suspected of backing Haftar but denies funding Russian mercenaries on the ground.

As a follow-up to the Berlin summit, the two rival administrations must now choose representatives to attend talks in order to revive the moribund political process, UN envoy to Libya Ghassan Salame said.

Algeria, which attended the conference and shares a border with Libya, on Monday offered to hold inter-Libyan talks on its soil. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will travel to Algiers on Tuesday, his ministry said Monday, to discuss the situation in Libya, among other topics.

Future Libya talks are certain to face huge challenges, particularly after pro-Haftar forces blocked oil exports from Libya's main ports last week.

Meanwhile, Libyans on social media remained skeptical, the deep divisions reflected in comments such as "who won, Haftar or Sarraj?"

Tripoli resident Abdul Rahman Milud said a "another summit isn't necessary." Establishing "a consensus among Libyans themselves" is much more important, he told AFP.



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Berlin talks important step in resolving Libya crisis: Egypt FMLibya strongman Haftar in Athens for talks ahead of Berlin peace conference

British MPs call for UK to recognize Palestinian state

Mon, 2020-01-20 21:20

LONDON: A group of British MPs has called for the UK to recognize the state of Palestine ahead of a visit by Prince Charles to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

In a letter to The Times, the MPs, along with figures from think tanks and pressure groups, said the move was long overdue and would help fulfil Britain's "promise of equal rights for peoples in two states."

The call comes as the heir to the British throne travels on Thursday to Israel and the occupied West Bank.

During the visit, he will meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem.

Prince Charles will also attend the World Holocaust Forum to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The letter said since 2014, no meaningful progress has been made in the peace process, and Israel's actions are pushing a two-state solution beyond reach. "Illegal Israeli settlements, described by the Foreign Office as undermining peace efforts, are expanding," the letter said.

Among the signatories are Emily Thornberry, a candidate for the Labour Party leadership, and Crispin Blunt, chairman of the Conservative Middle East Council.

Husam Zomlot, the Palestinian envoy to the UK, welcomed the move but said full recognition from the British government should have happened many years ago.

"Recognition doesn't contradict peace-making and negotiations," Zomlot told Arab News, referring to the main argument used by the UK against taking such a step.

If not now, when? H. E. [@hzomlot](#) thanks the UK MPs and heads of organisation who called for the recognition of [#Palestine](#) in a letter published in The Times newspaper today.
pic.twitter.com/H4wifhuYEh

– Palestine in the UK (@PalMissionUK) [January 20, 2020](#)

"It reinforces the vision (of a Palestinian state) and a negotiated two-state

solution. It should happen now because of the threat of annexation (of Palestinian territory) and the killing of the two-state solution.”

Alistair Carmichael, a Liberal Democrat MP who signed the letter, told Arab News that the policies of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government toward Palestine “makes the achievement of a two-state solution more and more remote with every week that passes.”

He said: “The UK has historic and political obligations toward Israelis and Palestinians. There’s now no longer any good reason not to recognize the state of Palestine.”

A spokesman for Labour MP Fabian Hamilton, who also signed the letter, told Arab News: “The fact that this has cross-party support shows the growing desire across Parliament for the recognition of a Palestinian state and a two-state solution.”

Chris Doyle, director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, said the international community needs to finally stand up for the solution that it has had on the table for decades.

Doyle, an Arab News columnist, said the letter is an “indication that many people in British politics think we should be doing this, we should be standing up for the Palestinian right to self-determination, the legal rights, at a time when the state of Israel is doing everything to stop this, to take more land from the Palestinians.”

The letter was timed to coincide with a meeting of European foreign ministers on Monday, who discussed the Middle East peace process.

The Palestinian Authority, which runs parts of the West Bank, has been increasing calls for European countries to recognize the state of Palestine as the US has shifted to a more pro-Israel stance, including recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in 2017.

Writing in The Guardian on Monday, Saeb Erekat, secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said Europe could strengthen its role in the peace process if it recognized Palestine.

“European recognition of this state is not only a European responsibility but a concrete way to move toward a just and lasting peace,” he said.

Only nine out of the 28 EU countries have so far recognized Palestine as a state, compared to 138 out of the 193 UN member states.

In 2011, the UK’s then-Foreign Minister William Hague said the British government “reserves the right” to recognize Palestine “at a time of our own choosing, and when it can best serve the cause of peace.”

In 2012, the UN General Assembly voted to upgrade Palestine’s status to that of “non-member observer state.”

Zomlot said that the UK has a historically important role in the Palestinian issue, dating back to the British mandate of Palestine (1920-1948, the Balfour Declaration – a public statement issued by the British government in 1917 that expressed support to the formation of “a national home for the Jewish people” – and subsequently the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe) and the military occupation of that 1967 borders.

“With the current quest for the UK to be a global player and post-Brexit, we believe that the UK could be a very important factor in achieving Middle East peace,” he added.



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Catholic bishops call on West to recognize PalestineIsraeli, Palestinian youth fear conflict will 'never end,' says poll