

Activists reject candidates for new Lebanon government

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BEIRUT: Activists have rejected candidates being considered for Lebanon's new government after their names were leaked on social media.

A recession, massive street protests and a political crisis have created chaos in the country and the man tasked with forming a new government and resolving these problems is Hassan Diab, who is prime minister-designate.

But the identities of candidates being considered for ministerial jobs have been leaked online and protesters are questioning whether they are truly independent of the ruling elite, which has been one of the targets of demonstrators' anger and frustration.

President Michel Aoun has promised the Lebanese people that a new government will be their New Year's Eve present, meeting Diab for a second time on Friday. Diab wants a government consisting of 18 specialists.

Ziad Abdul Samad, an NGO specialist and civil society activist, said the leaked names showed disrespect to the people who had taken to the streets to condemn corruption and mismanagement.

"The most obvious proof was the provocative names that were discussed by the prime minister-designate and the representatives of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement in order to get their blessing," he told Arab News. "This will raise tension in the streets, especially with the absence of solutions to economic problems."

Public affairs expert and activist Walid Fakhreddin said the civil movement was still ongoing at a political level and not necessarily in the streets, especially because of the holiday season and bad weather.

FASTFACT

A recession, massive street protests and a political crisis have created chaos in the country.

He criticized Diab's performance, saying the prime-minister designate had not expressed his vision for the structure of the new government. "Even the names leaked appear to have their own agendas ... we are on the brink of an economic disaster and Lebanon does not have the luxury of time," he told Arab News.

There were no divisions in the civil society movement, he added, but different points of view. "One that wants to continue the protests with the same pace and another that wants to wait for facts and results before

formulating its stance.”

Riad El-Solh and Martyrs squares in Beirut were almost empty of protesters except for those clearing tents of rainwater or those setting up tents in place of ones that had been destroyed by a storm.

Brig. Gen. Imad Othman, general-director of Lebanon’s Internal Security Forces, said after a meeting with Aoun that police spent 70 days on the streets with demonstrators and that 295 officers were injured in clashes with protesters.

“The army that has a mission to fight the enemy finds itself facing a painful situation, and bearing this responsibility emanates from its keenness to protect public peace, and prevent discord,” he added.

Diab faces significant hurdles, including a boycott by influential political blocs that refused to nominate him because of the backing he received from the Free Patriotic Movement, Hezbollah, the Amal party and their allies.

The Future Movement has refused to take part in the new government, while Lebanon’s Sunni authority Dar El-Fatwa has not declared its position on Diab’s nomination.

Political declarations indicate that those who pledged to accept Diab’s condition of an independent and specialist government comprising a limited number of ministers have backed down on their promise.

A decrease in the intensity of street demonstrations may have also led the political elite to believe it can contain the effects of a crisis that led to Saad Hariri’s resignation as prime minister two months ago.



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[An Egyptian startup weaves a success story with kilim-making](#)

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CAIRO: When Ibrahim Shams and his graphic designer wife Noha El-Taher were decorating their baby daughter's room, they wanted to add a traditional touch, a kilim rug.

But the ones available were outdated in their designs and mostly made in China using cheap fabrics.

Spotting a gap in the market for a traditional craft suited to the modern palate, the pair decided to start their own business: Kiliim, a social enterprise and lifestyle brand to revive and sustain the local craft of the flat-weaving technique.

The origins of kilim are contested. Some claim it is a pharaonic craft, while others attribute it to the Ottoman Empire.

"There's a small village in the Nile Delta, Fowwa, which was very, very famous for kilim," said Shams. "With the decline in tourism, the industry began to fade."

The pair started traveling to Fowwa and meeting with weavers, and settled on one workshop that had the most "positive" people.

"Everyone was very negative about the craft, saying that 10-15 years from now, there would be no weavers left," said Shams.

Kiliim was launched in 2016 with four weavers who were all born and raised in the village and had inherited the craft from their fathers and grandfathers.

Kiliim partners with the craftsmen, rather than hiring them as employees. Each weaver is paid for what they produce, with the workshop owned by the chief craftsman.

A year after launching, Kiliim won the social enterprise track at the MIT Arab Start-up Competition, taking home \$50,000.

Back in 2003, there were some 2,000 kilim weavers. Now there are fewer than

300, according to Shams. Much of the weavers' livelihood depended on tourism.

At its peak, Egypt's tourism sector accounted for 11 percent of its gross domestic product in 2010, prior to the Jan. 25 revolution in 2011. But with the unrest that followed, the number of tourists swiftly declined.



"They usually sold them (kilims) to touristic areas in Sharm El-Sheikh and Hurghada as souvenirs that symbolize the country and heritage of Egypt," said Shams.

"We saw another opportunity that the weavers had missed – the designs, the materials and the overall finished product weren't trendy anymore," he added.

"They knew a certain pattern and style, and it was the lack of innovation and the recession that led to their decline."

With her background in design, El-Taher used her skills to create new patterns and better branding for the trade and the village. The weavers were a little reluctant at first with the new designs, but eventually came around.

"In the beginning everything was a little tough. Everything was funded from our own savings," said Shams.

"It was very, very tough in the beginning. It's an online business, but many people like to come and try out the rug and see it physically, so that was challenge in the very beginning."

There was a reluctance to buy the rug before seeing it in person, so the couple began to offer a free home trial service.

"They can select from different designs, and we send them to their house and see which one fits best," said Shams.

This led to an 80 percent conversion rate from trial to purchase, and cut out the need for a physical store in the first few years.

They plan to open their first brick-and-mortar store in the first quarter of 2020. Plans to digitize the trial experience by offering a virtual simulator are also in the works.

“We also want to start a school to teach the craft to those who want to learn, followed by an internship program to shadow the weavers with an opportunity to the join the team,” said Shams.

This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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[**Synchronized Israeli attacks on**](#)

Jordan, King Abdullah

Sat, 2019-12-28 01:15

AMMAN: A series of anti-Jordanian articles appeared almost simultaneously in the Israeli media targeting Jordan and revealing deep Israeli anger and hatred for the Jordanian monarch. The articles appear to be based on a single source and they all reached the same conclusion.

The independent daily Haaretz revealed that "Israel has big plans for Jordan, but they don't include King Abdullah II." The paper said that "a long list of articles by right-wing commentators, PR hacks for the government, were published over the past month in media (Caroline Glick in Israel Hayom, Aryeh Eldad in Maariv, Motti Karpel in Makor Rishon and others), raised similar arguments and identical conclusions."

Smadar Perry a respected writer on Arab affairs for the widest circulating daily Yediot Aharonot told Arab News that Israelis are "divided and some are acting in a crazy way." She said that while the anti-Jordan idea was born long before the latest anti-Israeli positions of Jordan, things are spinning out of control because of the elections. "These (anti-Jordan) ideas have been with us before, but because of the elections people will hear many crazy ideas." Israel's Herut party under former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, which represented the core of what is now the Israeli Likud party was famous for an expansionist slogan that said: "The Jordan has two banks; this one is our and the other one too."

Perry told Arab News that the head of the Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu, only cares about himself. "Half of the Israelis don't know what they want regarding Jordan, but they know they want Bibi (Netanyahu) and he is focused on the elections. He wants to win and he doesn't care about Jordan." Perry said that only the military people are doing their job and are trying to make some sense in Israeli foreign policy.

Anees Sweidan, director of the Arab Affairs Department in the PLO, told Arab News that Palestine and Jordan are one in all political issues. "The incitement against Jordan reflects the chaos that Israel under the corrupt Netanyahu is experiencing." Sweidan said that Jordan is being made to pay the political price for its consistent support to Palestine and rejection of the Israeli attempts to annex the Jordan Valley."

Hani Al-Masri, director general of the Masarat think tank in Ramallah, told Arab News that there are multiple reasons for the Israeli attacks on Jordan. "It is connected to Jordan's recent statements and falls within the anti-Arab one-upmanship that has become the hallmark of Israeli elections both internal and national." AlMasri said that Jordan's strong opposition to the Israeli annexation plans is denying right-wing Israelis their dream" that Jordan will one day become Palestine."

Monjed Jado, publisher of the Palestine News Network and an observer of the Israeli political scene, told Arab News that right-wing Israelis are angry.

“They were angry with the insistence of Jordan to have the two enclaves returned, but they were disappointed with the Americans whom they expected to put pressure on the King to be more supportive of Israel’s desires.”



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Hundreds join final Gaza-Israel border protests for three months
Benjamin Netanyahu wins party vote in boost ahead of Israeli election

[Egypt to reopen historic Jewish synagogue in January](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-27 01:53

ALEXANDRIA: Egypt is set to reopen a historic Jewish synagogue in Alexandria after a three-year process of restoration. The Ministry of Antiquities announced that the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue will be reopened in January.

It is one of the largest Jewish temples in the Middle East and has undergone a series of restorations since 2017.

Egypt's Minister of Antiquities Khaled Al-Anani visited Alexandria to see the latest developments at the synagogue and other archaeological sites, including the Greco-Roman Museum, the Alexandria National Museum and some jewelry museums.

The ministry said: "The renovation work included the structural reinforcement of the building, architectural and precise restoration of the main facades and the decorative walls, as well as wooden and copper elements in the temple. In addition to the development of modern lighting systems, insurance and warning, in preparation for its opening in January."

The statement added that the restoration of the synagogue and the Greco-Roman Museum comes within the interest of the Egyptian government in preserving its heritage, whether it be pharaonic, Jewish, Coptic or Islamic.

After the decrease of the Jewish population in Egypt, Eliyahu Hanavi is one of the two remaining synagogues in Alexandria. It was built in the 1850s but closed at the end of 2012 due to security reasons.

The temple was included in the 2018 Archeology List of the World Monuments Fund for Endangered Monuments.

According to its website, it is a "symbol of Egypt's historical pluralism, when diverse national and religious communities lived together in a spirit of coexistence and religious freedom."

This restoration is a part of a cooperation protocol signed between the ministry and the Armed Forces Engineering Authority in April 2017, with a goal to develop and repair eight archeological sites, including Al-Baroun Palace in the Heliopolis district and the Mohammed Ali Shubra Palace.

The agreement also commits them to the development of the pyramids of Giza and the restoration of Alexan Palace in Assiut.

The protocol is an attempt to stimulate tourism and encourage Egyptian visitors – especially children – to visit regional museums to discover the greatness of their country's civilization and raise their archeological and cultural awareness.



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Two killed in attack on German synagogue UAE's first official synagogue to open in multi-faith complex in 2022

[**A decade of opportunities awaits Arab countries**](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-27 01:42

ABU DHABI: From China's emergence to the need for smart cities, the Middle East is well placed to benefit from what the future holds, according to a number of experts who attended the region's first SALT Conference, held recently in Abu Dhabi.

Their verdict chimes in with the remarks made by the UAE's Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future Mohammed Al-Gergawi in his opening speech at Dubai's Arab Strategy Forum earlier this month, where he spoke of the possibility of a "bright future," provided Arab states take advantage of upcoming opportunities.

“Our region still has an increasing strategic importance and possesses huge human potential,” said Al-Gergawi, who noted that more than 100 million Arab youth were predicted to enter the labor market over the next 10 years.

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

- Can OPEC survive in a decarbonizing world economy?
- Will economic sanctions lead to Iran regime collapse?
- Will nuclear proliferation accelerate?
- Will water scarcity heighten security risks for the Middle East and North Africa?
- Will gas fields off the Cyprus-Lebanon-Egypt coasts promote regional stability?
- Will countries fragment in the 21st century?
- Is US dominance in military, economic and other spheres weakening?
- Will US-China tech conflicts become opportunities for collaboration?
- Will the world trade system survive the populist trend?
- Are the world’s major economies increasingly vulnerable to cyber warfare?
- Will steady growth with brief downturns define the global business cycle?

Source: Good Judgment and Arab Strategy Forum

Parag Khanna, managing partner of FutureMap, a data and scenario-based strategic global advisory firm, used the term “West Asia” to describe the Middle East while discussing the region’s prospects in the context of the Asian growth story.

“If this collection of countries in Asia, such as Pakistan and India, grow at just 5 percent, (they will have) a combined GDP equal to China’s present GDP in less than 10 years,” he said.

Among the key drivers of Asian financial growth and reform identified by Khanna are savings and consumption, local currency liquidity, capital-account liberalization, and purchasing-power parity.

“Asia has been getting a lot of things right in economic and structural reforms. What Japan and South Korea have already done, and China is doing with its capital account, means a lot of countries want to do that too and manage their balance of payments. This copycat effect is going to continue to play out,” he added.

“We are currently living in a tripolar economic world, with North America, Europe and Asia standing as very important pillars today.

“The mobility of people and the growing mobility of capital are going hand in hand. In the last 15 years, China accelerated (the pace of) its outbound investments into infrastructure.

“The regions that have benefited the most from Chinese outbound investments are Europe, Africa, West Asia, East Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt,” said Khanna.

Referring to China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, he pointed out that the trend it represented was irreversible, adding that the regions that belonged together in the “Silk Road” spirit were going to continue to reconnect no matter what.

Today, the UAE is China’s largest trading partner and is increasing its trade with Southeast (and South Asia), particularly India.

“In terms of the geography of the UAE and Abu Dhabi, when historians talk about the ancient Silk Roads and the pre-colonial world, (we talk about) Afro-Eurasia,” Khanna added. “It captures Africa, Europe and Asia – and the 16th-century world was Afro-Eurasia.

“What’s happening today is the resurrection of this Afro-Eurasian system. So, there couldn’t be a better time to be based in the UAE and looking multi-directionally into how to be a connector and a bridge between these three very important demographic and economic regions.”

In his remarks at the future-focused Arab Strategic Forum, Al-Gergawi had also posed the crucial question: In which direction are (Arab) countries heading?

The answer, strictly from the standpoint of urban development, is smart cities.

Conceptually, a smart city integrates information and communication technology and various physical devices connected to the Internet of Things (IoT) network to optimize the efficiency of different operations and services and connect to citizens.

In recent years, interest in smart cities has grown in tandem with technological, economic and environmental changes such as the shift toward online retail and entertainment, climate change, greying societies, urban population growth, and pressures on public finances.

With 60 percent of the global population – or 5.5 billion people – expected to live in cities by 2050, a gradual move over to smart cities is inevitable, according to Thomas Bardawil, director at Plug and Play Smart Cities.



A \$16 billion high-speed railway linking Makkah and Madinah highlights major changes in the 'mobility industry' as technology drives the rise of smart cities. (AFP)

However, the way cities have been built, reflected in current levels of traffic, pollution and property prices, is "unsustainable," said Bardawil. "We are not changing to smart cities because we think it's cool. We are changing because we have to."

In an interview with Arab News on the sidelines of the SALT Conference, Bardawil said that Europe, with its built infrastructure, did not hold as much promise in regard to smart-city development as the Middle East did with its vast swathes of unused land.

So, cities in the GCC region, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are where he expects to see some of the first smart cities emerge, as well as in China, where "promising" work is currently underway.

Bardawil cited three industries that he works closely with as part of the value chain of a smart city and essential for its development: mobility, energy and real estate.

"There is a big shift in the mobility industry and new generations don't seem to want to own cars anymore. So, we see mobility as a service becoming a major disruptor of the mobility industry, specifically for car manufacturers.

"They will not be about producing cars anymore. Rather they will be about how they can move cars around in the most efficient way possible," he added.

As far as energy was concerned, a revolution was happening in the industry at the moment, and Bardawil said: "Producing one kilowatt of renewable energy

today practically costs as much as producing it with traditional energy sources. The marginal cost of producing renewable energy is close to zero, with solar and wind.

“So, we see that everyone is going to be producing their own green energy and then sharing this energy with networks. People will be buying and selling energy off the grid.

“In a nutshell, it will bypass all these vertically integrated energy companies and all those middlemen that kept us from connecting to each other, and this is what we call ‘power to the people.’”

As people’s lifestyles evolved under the influence of sustainability, industries such as real estate would have to follow suit, Bardawil added. And with less human interaction thanks to innovation, he expected new technologies centered on the community as well as mixed-use buildings to gain ground.

“We build an ecosystem for innovation. We bring all the players together to connect them and provide them with information and the best practices because, at the end of the day, it’s about the knowledge.

“We need startups, governments, regulators and corporations, but it’s about doing it as a team. It’s all about the network.”

Bardawil pointed out that the construction of more efficient, resistant, sustainable and safe buildings using wood would soon be a reality.

“We are working on technology startups to actually make wood smart,” he said. “A smart city is one that has been thoroughly thought-out to be efficient, sustainable and able to adapt to the growing population, without having to compromise on the well-being of its people.”



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