

New Lebanese PM asks for chance to form government of independent technocrats

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 23:21

BEIRUT: "The revolutionaries are right," Lebanon's Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced on the second day of his new assignment. He added that his approach would be "to form a government of independent technocrats. But give me a chance."

Diab met with former prime ministers – Salim Hoss, Fouad Siniora and Tammam Salam – on Friday, as well as Hariri. His tour came in the wake of pro-Hariri protests held by Sunni Muslims in Beirut, Tripoli and parts of the Bekaa on Thursday night and Friday morning. Those protests escalated into violence, and at least four soldiers from the Fourth Intervention Regiment (the riot squad for the Internal Security Forces) were wounded as protesters threw stones at them.

One woman told Arab News: "Diab does not represent us. We are with the return of Hariri as prime minister." She accused those in the government of "obstructing Hariri's work toward achieving the reforms he wanted."

Hariri quickly called on his supporters to leave the streets immediately "if they loved him."

After his meetings, Diab said, "There is a positive atmosphere with everyone" and said Hariri had "expressed his willingness to cooperate to form a government."

"I am an independent technocrat, and my approach is to form a government of independent technocrats to serve the country and solve the problems (which have been) known for some time," he continued.

Diab said that the country had reached this crisis point after three decades of bad policies. "I understand the protesters' demands, but they must give us the chance to be able to form an exceptional government to tackle the thorny issues, and we will be one team, regardless of our affiliations," he said, adding that he expects to form his government within four-to-six weeks.

Against this background, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale arrived in Lebanon on Friday.

After meeting President Michel Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and Hariri, Hale said his visit reflected "the strength of the partnership between (our) two countries."

He added that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had asked him to meet with Lebanese leaders and urge them to "commit to meaningful and sustainable

reforms that can lead to a stable, prosperous, and secure Lebanon.”

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Hassan Diab, Lebanese prime minister

Hale said: “It is time to put aside partisan interests and act in the national interest, advancing reforms and forming a government that is committed to undertaking those reforms and capable of doing so. We have no role in saying who should lead and comprise such a Cabinet. Or indeed any Cabinet.”

“The unified, non-sectarian, and largely peaceful protests over the last 65 days reflect the Lebanese people’s longstanding and, frankly, legitimate demand for economic and institutional reform, better governance, and an end to endemic corruption,” he continued.

“America calls on the security forces to continue to guarantee the safety of protesters as they engage in peaceful demonstrations, and for restraint by all. Violence has no place in civil discourse. America wants Lebanon and its people -- all of its people – to succeed, and we will remain a committed partner in that effort.”

Aoun reportedly told Hale that protesters were being provided with “the necessary protection to ensure their freedom of expression without blocking roads, which conflicts with the international laws and norms that guarantee the freedom of others.”

Aoun stressed, according to his media office, that “the anti-corruption march continues intensely.”

The president also called on the US to renew its efforts to “persuade Israel to commit to the demarcation of maritime borders to establish calm and stability in the South.”



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Lebanon's new PM says he plans a government of experts
Regional pop-culture highlights from a poetic take on Lebanon's protests

Ankara, Moscow to discuss Libya settlement

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 23:17

ANKARA: Turkey will dispatch an official team to Russia for extensive talks on Libya ahead of the Berlin Libya Conference in January 2020.

Turkish diplomatic, security, and intelligence officers are expected to visit Moscow amid rising tensions in the East Mediterranean.

Experts caution this might signal growing differences between Ankara and Moscow, two proactive powers involved in the issue, over the North African country.

Yury Barmin, Middle East and North Africa director at the Moscow Policy Group, thinks the talks between Turkey and Russia may be a positive sign, but that discussions alone would not be enough to bridge the emerging gaps between them.

“Libya is not Syria. It is a very different and complex environment. Rules of engagement are very different, and there are so many actors that can really derail the whole peace process in Libya,” he told Arab News.

Emad Badi, a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute, said: “The reality is they (Turkey and Russia) can shape the contours of the military landscape surrounding Tripoli and can therefore dictate what comes next politically speaking.”

Barmin thinks that there is a need to include the US, France, Gulf countries and other relevant parties in broader discussions, and that the Berlin conference, which aims to facilitate peace in the region, could be a pathway to that.

FASTFACT

Turkish diplomatic, security, and intelligence officers are expected to visit Moscow amid rising tensions in the East Mediterranean.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently expressed readiness to send troops to Libya if requested by the country’s Government of National Accord (GNA) with whom he recently signed two controversial deals, one on security and military cooperation, and another on the delimitation of maritime borders in the East Mediterranean.

The agreement on security and military cooperation allows Turkish deployment in Libya to provide technical and military support. It also allows weapons sales to the GNA despite a UN arms embargo.

Turkey's Parliament will vote on the deal on Saturday, while the GNA unanimously approved it on Thursday. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that no request from the GNA for assistance had been made yet.

Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, said Turkey wanted to work with Russia on Libya, even if the two were backing different sides, because of previous cooperation in Syria.

"Turkey's goal is to use leverage over the Tripoli GNA government to achieve economic gains and influence. Turkey is happy to achieve a foothold and work with the Russians toward legitimizing it as a major player in Libya," Frantzman told Arab News.

"Libya will help (Turkey) repair its image and power in North Africa, and also frustrate Egypt. Turkey doesn't want to commit many troops – just a token presence using Turkish technology. As one of the main opponents of Egypt, Turkey will see any role as a victory," he added.



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Ankara searches for Moscow support for Libya cause

International prosecutor from ICC preparing to open Palestine war crimes probe

Author:

By MIKE CORDER and JOSEPH KRAUSS | AP

ID:

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Fri, 2019-12-20 15:49

THE HAGUE: The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court took a major step Friday toward opening an investigation into alleged war crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories, asking judges exactly what territory a future investigation could cover.

The announcement ended years of preliminary investigations into alleged crimes by both Israeli forces and Palestinians and signaled that Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda is preparing to open a formal probe.

It drew swift condemnation from Israel, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calling it “a dark day for truth and justice.”



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The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed it as "a long overdue step to move the process forward toward an investigation, after nearly five long and difficult years of preliminary examination."

While Israel is not a member of the court and does not recognize its jurisdiction, Palestinians have been recognized as a member state and requested an investigation. Even though Israel is not a member of the court, its citizens could face international arrest warrants if the ICC investigation indicts them for war crimes.

"I am satisfied that there is a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation into the situation in Palestine," Bensouda said in a statement. She said she is "satisfied that ... war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip."

Bensouda said she has now asked judges to outline the geographic scope of an investigation.

"Specifically, I have sought confirmation that the 'territory' over which the Court may exercise its jurisdiction, and which I may subject to investigation, comprises the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza," she said.

Netanyahu said Bensouda's decision "has turned the International Criminal Court into a political tool to delegitimize the State of Israel. The prosecutor has completely ignored the legal arguments we presented to her." At the Palestinians' request, Bensouda opened a preliminary investigation in 2015 into alleged violations of international law following the 2014 war between Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

With the peace process at a standstill for more than a decade, the Palestinians have in recent years sought to hold Israel accountable for alleged violations of international law, including the construction and expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Israel seized those territories along with the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three to be part of their future state.

In a legal opinion released Friday, Israel's Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit said the Palestinians do not meet the criteria of statehood because they do not have sovereignty over defined borders. Citing past peace agreements, Israel said the two sides had agreed to resolve their territorial dispute in negotiations.

"By approaching the ICC, the Palestinians are seeking to breach the framework agreed to by the parties and to push the Court to determine political issues that should be resolved by negotiations, and not by criminal proceedings," the legal opinion said.

The Palestinians insisted they are a fully-fledged member of the court and that the court has jurisdiction.



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Envoy: Saudi Arabia will remain a pioneer in its support for Palestine refugees

Foreign forces re-designing northern Syria puzzle

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 03:53

ANKARA: While all eyes are now on the unfolding developments in Libya and the East Mediterranean, Turkey's pro-government daily Yeni Safak reported significant changes in the deployment of foreign forces in northern Syria.

The US is setting up two new military posts in Syria, one in Himo village in Qamishli, and the other in Qahtaniya, to boost its footprint along the Turkish-Syrian border.

US troops, increasingly, find themselves neighbors to Russian soldiers and Syrian forces loyal to President Bashar Assad.

The presence of the US forces, 600 according to US Defense Secretary Mark Esper, is supposedly to help the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia against Daesh, and to monitor the area. They will also protect local residents and key infrastructure, such as oil fields, from external attacks.

In accordance with a US-brokered deal, YPG forces have withdrawn 30 km from the border to allow Turkey to set up a so-called "safe zone" using members of the anti-regime Syrian National Army (SNA).

In the meantime, Russia, deploying troops to bases previously evacuated by US forces, has expanded its presence around Qamishli.

Alexey Khlebnikov, an analyst at the Russian International Affairs Council, said Turkey considers the YPG the Syrian extension of the PKK, which has waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkish state. It would therefore not be pleased at US support for the militia.

"The Kurdish issue is the most important for Turkey in Syria, (but) it is unlikely that Ankara can do much militarily, with Russian, US and pro-Assad forces present," he told Arab News.

Human Rights Watch recently claimed it had found "damning evidence" of Syrian soldiers conducting summary executions, pillaging and other war crimes.

"Continued reports of atrocities by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army that now controls the area also raise fears that Turkish proxies are committing a form of ethnic cleansing by relocating people of Arab descent into the region, while preventing the Kurdish population from returning," Lara Seligman recently wrote in Foreign Policy.

Despite continued reports about the wrongdoings of the SNA in Syria, Khlebnikov said Ankara would not stop backing it.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in

Istanbul, said the continuing presence of the US in the area would continue while key assets remained under threat.

“Now the main concern of the American forces is to protect this (area). This is now the main goal of these new bases. They also want to send a message that they won’t abandon the Kurds with a complete withdrawal,” he told Arab News.

Turkey aims to settle at least one million Syrian refugees in northern Syria following the establishment of the infrastructure in the “safe zone.”

In the meantime, up to 50,000 Syrians are on their way to the Turkish border from the northwestern rebel-held province of Idlib, the country’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced on Thursday, with Russian and regime attacks pushing more and more refugees out of the province.

At least 24 civilians were reportedly killed by air strikes and artillery fire in Idlib on Tuesday.



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Hassan Diab set to be next Lebanon PM

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 03:33

BEIRUT: Lebanon has named academic and former education minister Hassan Diab as its next prime minister in a bid to end two months of political stalemate that has gripped the country.

Diab, vice president of the American University of Beirut, was nominated to head the next government by President Michel Aoun's parliamentary bloc, along with its allies Hezbollah, Amal Movement and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

The prime minister designate's first task will be to build a government capable of tackling Lebanon's worst economic turmoil for decades, while satisfying demands for change from the largest protest movement in almost two decades.

Diab secured the votes of 69 out of 128 members of Parliament on Thursday after caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri withdrew his candidacy and told Aoun his Future Movement parliamentary bloc would not participate in the next government.

However, the incoming premier failed to win a majority of Sunni, Druze or even Christian votes in the binding parliamentary consultations, raising questions about his ability to establish a stable leadership as the country struggles with rising unemployment and a collapsing economy.

The significant absence of Sunni and Druze votes also revealed changes in Lebanon's political alliances amid positioning for power in the future government.

Politicians close to Hezbollah and Amal tried to downplay the significance of the voting "gap" as they sought to head off objections to Diab's nomination.

Head of the Tawhid Party, Wiam Wahhab, said: "The Sunni opposition that named Diab won 40 percent of the Sunni votes in the parliamentary elections."

MP Qassem Hashem said: "The person who wins the majority of votes decides to accept or reject. Anything else is misplaced heresy."

However, Strong Republic MP Ziad Hawat described the consultations on Thursday as "a badly directed play in which all rules and regulations were violated."

He added: "This is a standard appointment exposed by the power of arms."

MP Paula Yacoubian said: "Those who are promoting Diab to head the government are trying to do so by using a minesweeper."

Diab, 60, was minister of education and higher education in Najib Mikati's government in 2011.

He appeared as a leadership candidate late on Wednesday after the Strong Lebanon bloc, Hezbollah and Amal agreed to nominate him following Hariri's withdrawal.

Hariri's parliamentary bloc, which includes 18 MPs, did not name anyone to head the government.

The Democratic Gathering bloc, which includes nine MPs representing Druze and Progressive Socialist Party loyalists, named former envoy Judge Nawaf Salam as its candidate, a decision backed by the Kataeb bloc, which includes three MPs.

Sami Gemayel, head of the bloc, said: "People want a neutral government and a prime minister who offers a new beginning."

Diab, who has a Ph.D. in computer engineering, won the votes of the Strong Lebanon bloc, which includes 19 MPs and is headed by MP Gibran Bassil.

He also won the votes of the Hezbollah bloc (13 MPs) and Amal (17 MPs).



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Lebanon talks for new PM begin Saad Hariri rules out returning as Lebanon's PM