

Lebanese police to boost security near banks amid unrest

Author:

Reuters

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BEIRUT: Lebanese security forces will boost measures near the country's banks that have been closed for more than a week over fears by employees for their safety amid nationwide unrest, police said Saturday.

Police said in a statement that there will be more patrols near banks and two policemen will be stationed outside every branch.

Lebanon's financial troubles have worsened since mass protests began on Oct. 17 over a plunging economy, and snowballed into calls for the entire political elite to step down.

An Interior Ministry statement said police commander Maj. Gen. Imad Othman met with banking officials and they agreed to take the measure "in order to guarantee the work of this vital sector."

Banks reopened Nov. 1 after a two-week closure because of the mass anti-government protests. But depositors have rushed to withdraw their money while lenders imposed varying capital controls, adding to the turmoil.

In some banks, customers insulted employees after they were told they cannot withdraw as much money as they want. The banks closed again on Nov. 9, and employees have been on strike since then.

Lebanon is passing through its worst economic and financial crisis in decades. The small Arab country is one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world and was already dealing with a severe fiscal crisis before the protests began, one rooted in years of heavy borrowing and expensive patronage networks run by entrenched political parties.

The Lebanese pound is trading at up to 1,900 to the dollar on the black market, a devaluation of nearly 30% from the official rate that has been fixed since 1997.

Confidence in the Lebanese economy received another blow late Friday night when Standard & Poor's downgraded the country's credit ratings to 'CCC/C' from 'B-/B'.

The agency said the outlook for Lebanon is negative in what "reflects the risk to the sovereign's creditworthiness from rising financial and monetary pressures tied to widespread protests and the resignation of the government." Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned his government on Oct. 29, meeting a key demand of the protesters. Since then President Michel Aoun has failed to call for consultations with heads of parliamentary blocs to name a new premier, raising concerns that the formation of a new Cabinet could be delayed.

"Recent temporary but prolonged bank closures and unofficial foreign currency transfer restrictions raise questions about the sustainability of the exchange rate regime, further eroding confidence," S&P warned.



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S&P downgrades protest-hit LebanonMedics protest economic crisis in Lebanon

[Protest graffiti fills Beirut's posh downtown](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Sat, 2019-11-16 11:04

BEIRUT: A majestic phoenix spreads its wings as Hayat Nazer adds a splash of color to a Beirut wall. As Lebanon's uprising enters its second month, graffiti has enveloped the capital's posh downtown. Since October 17, the chanting of tens of thousands of Lebanese denouncing the political elite have shaken the normally staid district around two Beirut squares – Martyrs' and Riad Al-Solh.

Nazer, a 32-year-old artist, is one of the protesters who would not normally frequent the area, famed for luxury boutiques and elegant buildings. But the unprecedented protests also offered her a first experience with street art. "I decided to go out in the street to be inspired by the people," she said during a cigarette break, standing next to pots of red, green and yellow paint.

Then she turned to place the final brushstroke on the mythical bird emerging from a burning forest – a reference to the fires that ravaged Lebanon's mountains shortly before the protests began.

"The phoenix reminds us that the Lebanese shouldn't lose hope. When we fall, we need to rise up and fly to freedom, to claim our rights," she said.

The long concrete barrier Nazer was painting protects a United Nations building, but has been named the "wall of the revolution" for the graffiti adorning it.

A ballerina pirouettes under shells, accompanied by the slogan "Rise up."

Further down, a big purple hand flashes a V for victory.

On nearby buildings, various causes are championed with spray-painted and stenciled slogans: "Our revolution is feminist"; "LGBT rights, love is not a crime"; and "We will burn your palaces."

Political leaders are lampooned in caricature, including outgoing Prime Minister Saad Hariri, longstanding parliament speaker Nabih Berri, and central bank governor Riad Salameh.

The contrast is striking compared with the nearby opulence of a district that was controversially rebuilt after being ravaged during the 1975-1990 civil war.

Today a Rolex clock tower stands in front of a parliament cordoned off by security forces. Working-class souks have been replaced by a modern commercial center, home to banks and French luxury brands.

The reconstruction of the district, famed for its stone buildings in neo-Venetian and neo-Moorish style, was led by Solidere, the real estate company of billionaire former prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Its detractors say the project killed the soul of a formerly vibrant neighborhood in order to attract Gulf investment and wealthy tourists.

"This city has become an icon of capitalism," said artist and rights activist Selim Mawad.

He jumped onto a plastic barricade to retouch a mural of stylized bulls alongside the slogan: "What is the future of our revolution?"

Lebanon's uprising – like protests elsewhere in the Middle East and Latin America – is both political and social.

"It's also about personal liberation, which is the foundation of a revolution," Mawad said.

He sees symbolism in graffiti.

"People say, 'I can't touch this building, I can't live there, so I'll leave my mark on it'," the paint-spattered artist said.

One day, assailants attacked the protesters in the area where Mawad was painting his mural. He was beaten and his bicycle stolen.

"Give back the stolen money – and don't forget the bike," he later painted next to a picture of a bull brandishing a red bicycle.

He hopes the paintings will be preserved. "It's the memory of an uprising. If they erase them, we will forget."

Nearby, Rida Mawla left a meeting and decided to take a walk in the city

center, something he said he never previously did.

"I'm starting to feel like downtown is a bit more like me," the business consultant said.

"In theory it's the place where everyone should meet, but the ruling class has taken possession of it," he said.

He pointed out his favorite graffiti, a big black tag scrawled on a wall: "Beirut has spoken."



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Lebanese students join Beirut protests
Protesters block roads in Beirut, other parts of Lebanon

[Car bomb kills at least 18 in Syrian town held by Turkey](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Sat, 2019-11-16 10:46

ANKARA: A car bomb exploded Saturday in a northern Syrian town controlled by Turkey-backed opposition fighters, killing at least 18 people and wounding several others, Syrian opposition activists and Turkey's Defense Ministry said.

Northern Syria has been hit by several explosions that have killed and wounded scores of people over the past month. That's since Turkey began a military operation against Kurdish fighters in the wake of President Donald Trump's decision to pull the bulk of American troops out of northern Syria. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 19 people, including 13 civilians, were killed Saturday in the town of Al-Bab in Aleppo province. The Aleppo Media Center, an activist collective, said 15 people were killed in the blast in a busy part of town near a bus station. Turkey's Defense Ministry said the blast killed 18 people and blamed the main Kurdish militia, known as the People's Protection Units.

It is not uncommon for reports to give differing casualty figures in the immediate aftermath of this kind of attack.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack.

A video posted online by Albab City, an activist collective, showed several vehicles on fire with black smoke billowing from a wide street with shops on both sides. Inside the bus station, several white minibuses appear damaged. "It looks like doomsday. May God help us," a man could be heard saying as five young men carried a wounded person away. At least two bloodied and wounded men could be seen rushed away on motorcycles.

Turkey-backed opposition fighters took control of parts of Aleppo province, including the towns of Al-Bab and Afrin, in previous military offensives in 2016 and 2018, respectively.

The past month's attacks have come amid an expanding Turkish invasion of into northeast Syria against Kurdish-held towns and villages along a stretch of the border.

Three car bombs went off Monday in the northeastern Syrian town of Qamishli near the border with Turkey, killing at least six people, according to activists and Syria's state news agency SANA.

On Nov. 2, a car bomb killed 13 people in the northern Syrian town of Tal Abyad, which is also held by Turkey-backed opposition fighters.

The Turkish offensive has aimed at pushing Kurdish fighters away from the border. Those Kurdish fighters had been key US allies in the fight against the Islamic State group. Turkey considers the Syrian Kurdish fighters terrorists linked to a Kurdish insurgency within Turkey.

Turkish forces have consolidated control over a stretch of the border running 120 kilometers (70 miles) wide and 30 kilometers (20 miles) deep into Syria. They have also kept up pressure outside that area, fighting with Kurdish forces on the edges.

Syrian government forces and their Russian allies have moved into other parts of the border under a Russian-Turkish deal.



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Syria's Assad says 'resistance' will force US troops out
Dozens attend funeral of Daesh-slain priest in northeast Syria

[Sudan is a partner, sanctions will end after process: US official](#)

Fri, 2019-11-15 23:28

WASHINGTON: The United States no longer has an adversarial relationship with the Sudanese government and sees it as a partner, but removing it from a list of state sponsors of terrorism is a process, Tibor Nagy, assistant secretary for African affairs at the State Department said on Friday.

"It's not an event, it's not flipping a light switch. It's a process and we are heavily, continuously engaged with our Sudanese interlocutors on how we can go about doing that," he told reporters in a briefing. "It will happen

when it happens, as quickly as possible,” he added.



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Amid unrest, Sudan's bourse maps out expansion plans
Sudan PM talks of peace on maiden trip to Darfur

[Tunisia's Ennahda names Habib Jemli as choice for PM](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Fri, 2019-11-15 15:04

TUNIS: Tunisia's moderate Islamist Ennahda, which came first in last month's parliamentary elections, has named Habib Jemli, a former junior agriculture minister, as its choice to become prime minister, party spokesman Imed

Khemiri said on Friday.

President Kais Saied is expected to officially ask him to form a new government later on Friday.

Jemli has two months to build a governing coalition from a fractured parliament in which Ennahda, the largest party, holds only a quarter of the seats.

On Wednesday, its election foe Heart of Tunisia supported Ennahda's veteran leader Rached Ghannouchi as parliament speaker, a sign the two might put aside their earlier hostility and join together in coalition.

Any new government that Jemli is able to muster would need the support of at least one other party to command even the slender parliamentary majority of 109 seats needed to pass legislation.

Jemli, 60, an agricultural engineer, served as a junior minister in the first post-revolutionary government formed in late 2011, which was also led by Ennahda.

Analysts say the new government will need clear political will and strong backing in parliament to push through economic reforms started by the outgoing prime minister, Youssef Chahed, who is acting as caretaker during coalition talks.

His cabinet has focused on spending cuts backed by the International Monetary Fund to bring Tunisia's hefty deficit and public debt under control while raising spending on security to woo back tourists.

Economic woes – unemployment of 15% nationally and 30% in some cities, inflation of nearly 7% and a weak dinar – have plagued Tunisia since its 2011 revolution ended autocratic rule, introduced democracy and sparked the "Arab Spring".

Those problems, alongside deteriorating public services and a public perception of widespread government corruption, drove voters to reject the political establishment in this autumn's elections.

That public anger may make it harder for a new prime minister to continue to cut spending, and he will be buffeted by the same competing demands to control the deficit while improving services.

President Saied, an independent retired law professor, has already pushed anti-corruption proposals since his inauguration, a programme that diplomats have said could win enough public support to buy time for new economic reforms.

Heart of Tunisia, which came second in the parliamentary election, is headed by media mogul Nabil Karoui who was detained for much of the election period on corruption charges, which he denies.

Ennahda, whose own candidate lost to Saied and Karoui in the first round of a separate presidential election, had sworn not to enter into coalition with his Heart of Tunisia party, painting it as part of a corrupt elite.



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Tunisia's parliament picks Ennahda leader as speaker
Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda throws weight behind vote frontrunner