

Lebanon's Bassil hits out at Hezbollah amid country's political paralysis

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By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Sun, 2022-01-02 14:32

BEIRUT: Lebanese lawmaker Gebran Bassil has hit out at ally Hezbollah, as the country entered 2022 experiencing the same political paralysis as the year before.

Cabinet sessions are yet to resume as the ministers of Hezbollah and the Amal movement are still refusing to attend sessions.

Bassil, who heads the Free Patriotic Movement, on Sunday sharply criticized what he called "the militia warlords and the leaders of corruption."

Neither Hezbollah, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, nor Lebanese Forces party leader Samir Geagea were spared in his remarks. Nor did the governor of the central bank, Riad Salameh, emerge unscathed as Bassil took aim.

Bassil, who has been an ally of Hezbollah since 2006 through the Mar Mikhael Agreement, asked: "Where is the consensual democracy? Is it (by) paralyzing the Cabinet and attacking the president and his rule? Is it by attacking the Constitutional Council? Where is the defensive strategy to solve problems with sister countries?"

His comments come amid a devastating economic crisis in Lebanon and ahead of critical parliamentary elections in which his party is expecting tough competition.

He added: "Making empty promises then belittling us and what we represent is unacceptable. Of course, we would be more powerful in the elections if we were to ally with Hezbollah, but if we need to choose between winning the elections and keeping our dignity, then I would say it's better to be alone than with bad company.

"Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah will say that such matters should only be discussed in closed meetings. That's true, but we have tried and tried to see eye to eye.

"We do not want to disregard the understanding we have with Hezbollah because it is a sound understanding, based on national constants. However, we want a better one because it is no longer effective. Our priority is the state and reforms. Their priority is the resistance and defending it. We cannot lose the state and the resistance, but we can win both."

His remarks also come amid a worsening division between President Michel Aoun and his team on the one hand and Hezbollah and Berri on the other.

Further bickering is expected against the backdrop of Berri's demand to hold an extraordinary parliament session, which requires Aoun's signature, while Nasrallah is expected to give a highly anticipated speech on Monday.

Bassil said his party was the only one that stood against foreign projects such as the "deal of the century," a reference to former US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan, and local ones that "target our rights" as Christians.

"Those who disrupted the work of the Taif Agreement have turned our democracy into a disruptive one that prevents any decision from being taken, even if it is unanimous. I do not understand the obstruction, the Parliament approves the laws it wants and the rest is kept in the bottom drawer, including the gas law that feeds all electricity plants and the criminal audit law."

Bassil said that Berri ultimately decided which laws were subject to discussion and which were not, and he reiterated Aoun's demand for a decentralized administrative and financial system.

"Whoever thinks they can use force to get their way should reconsider and see where such attempts have led others."

The lawmaker also attacked Salameh who, he said, was "politically protected by the pillars of the political system."

He accused Salameh of orchestrating the largest organized robbery of people's money, claiming the top banking official was wanted in seven countries but "no one dares to address him in Lebanon."

He alleged that the governor had obstructed the criminal audit into the central bank's accounts and was sabotaging the financial recovery plan with the IMF.

Bassil further said that Salameh had "illegally applied a haircut on deposits and is still making profits and smuggling money abroad."

He spoke about the price the FPM had to pay for supporting Hezbollah since the international community was working on isolating it.

"When we were asked to partake in this isolation, we refused. We provided political support to the resistance against Israel and Daesh. We also received political support from Hezbollah in return and attempts to isolate Hezbollah are ongoing."

Bassil, whom political observers believe has lost a lot of his popularity in the Christian community, accused Geagea of being "a tool for foreign parties – Israel and the US – seeking sedition in Lebanon."

Lebanese Forces lawmaker Imad Wakim tweeted in response to Bassil's speech: "He unleashed his delusions. Of course, he had to talk about Aoun's lost powers and the rights of the Christians, blaming everyone except the FPM. Has he forgotten that people now refer to him as Pinocchio and no longer believe anything he says?"



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As the crises in Lebanon continue into 2022 so does the suffering of its people
Lebanon seizes Captagon shipment in fake oranges

[4 Syrians die after burning coal for heat in south Lebanon](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Sun, 2022-01-02 14:34

BEIRUT: A Syrian mother and her three children died in their sleep after

inhaling toxic fumes from burning coal to heat their room in a village in southern Lebanon, a rescue group said Sunday. Youssef Al-Dor, an official with Resala Health Ambulance Association, said he transported the bodies to be buried from a hospital where the four were pronounced dead. Al-Dor said the family used coal to warm their room on a cold night in a house in Kharayab, a southern village overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. An official from Fakhri Hospital said the mother, 31, and her kids ages 8, 7 and 4 were already dead on arrival. They were declared dead of asphyxiation. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. Lebanon's state National News Agency said the four died in their home. Lebanon, a country of 6 million people, is home to 1.5 million Syrians who fled the now decade-old civil war in their country. They often live in squalid camps and shoddy homes. As Lebanon grapples with an unprecedented economic crisis, poverty has deepened for both Lebanese and Syrians. The United Nations estimates that 90 percent of Syrian refugee households live in extreme poverty.





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Lebanon seizes Captagon shipment in fake oranges
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[Egypt pushes for calm after flare-up in Gaza hostilities](#)

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Sun, 2022-01-02 09:23

JERUSALEM: Egyptian officials Sunday pushed for Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip to rein in hostilities and adhere to a cease-fire

in place since the war in May.

The Egyptian efforts came a day after Hamas militants launched rockets into the Mediterranean Sea off central Israel, prompting Israel to carry out airstrikes on militant positions in Gaza early Sunday. No casualties were reported.

The Israeli military said it struck "a rocket manufacturing site and military posts" belonging to Hamas in the Gaza Strip overnight in response to Saturday's rocket fire.

"Whoever points missiles at Israel bears responsibility," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said at the start of the government's weekly Cabinet meeting.

On Wednesday, Palestinian militants shot an Israeli contractor working along the border fence and Israel responded with tank fire at militant positions in what was the first exchange of fire in months.

Egyptian officials called on Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups in Gaza to stop their actions seen by Israel as "provocative," and for Israel to accelerate arrangements agreed upon as part of the cease-fire, an Egyptian diplomat with knowledge of the ongoing efforts said. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter with the media.

"Neither side wants a full-blown war," the diplomat said. "They just want guarantees and steps on the ground."

The cease-fire, brokered by Egypt and other mediators, has been fragile but largely held since the 11-day war between Hamas and Israel in May. But the militant group says Israel has not taken serious steps to ease the blockade it imposed on Gaza with Egypt after the Islamic movement seized control of the coastal enclave in 2007.

At the same time, the smaller Islamic Jihad militant group has threatened military action against Israel if a hunger-striking Palestinian prisoner dies. Hisham Abu Hawash, an Islamic Jihad member held by Israel under administrative detention, has staged a hunger strike for over 130 days.

Israel's controversial policy of administrative detention allows suspects to be held without charge indefinitely. Israel says the practice is necessary to keep dangerous suspects in custody without disclosing critical intelligence that could expose sources. Palestinians and rights groups decry the policy as a violation of due process.



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Egypt brings temperature down after 'malfunctioning' Hamas rockets fall into MedIsraeli strikes Hamas targets in Gaza with fighter jets, helicopters and tanks

[Clashes in southeast Iran kill 3 troops, 5 bandits: Report](#)

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Sat, 2022-01-01 16:43

TEHRAN: Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard and an armed criminal gang clashed on Saturday in a restive southeastern province, leaving three Guard members and "at least five bandits" dead, the state-run IRNA news agency

reported.

The report said the fighting took place late Saturday evening in the district of Kourin, about 1,120 kilometers (700miles) southeast of the capital, Tehran, and near the Pakistani border. It also said that at least five other bandits were wounded. There were no further details.

The area is in Sistan and Baluchistan province, has been the scene of occasional clashes between Iranian government forces and various militant groups. The province, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan, is also where a Sunni separatist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda and known as Jeish Al-Adl, or Army of Justice, operates.

Security forces have also clashed with drug traffickers in the province, located along a major smuggling route for Afghan opium and heroin.

Last July, armed bandits shot and killed four Guard members in the province.



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Iraq vote victor Moqtada Sadr meets pro-Iran rivalsIran federation defends footballer in row over 'Israel flag' jersey

2022 Look Ahead: No end to suffering in sight for war-weary Syrians

Sat, 2022-01-01 20:02

MISSOURI / WASHINGTON: If 2020 was the year when fissures began to appear within the ranks of Syria's ruling Assad clan, then 2021 was the year of determined attempts by the leadership to tighten its grip and reclaim its legitimacy.

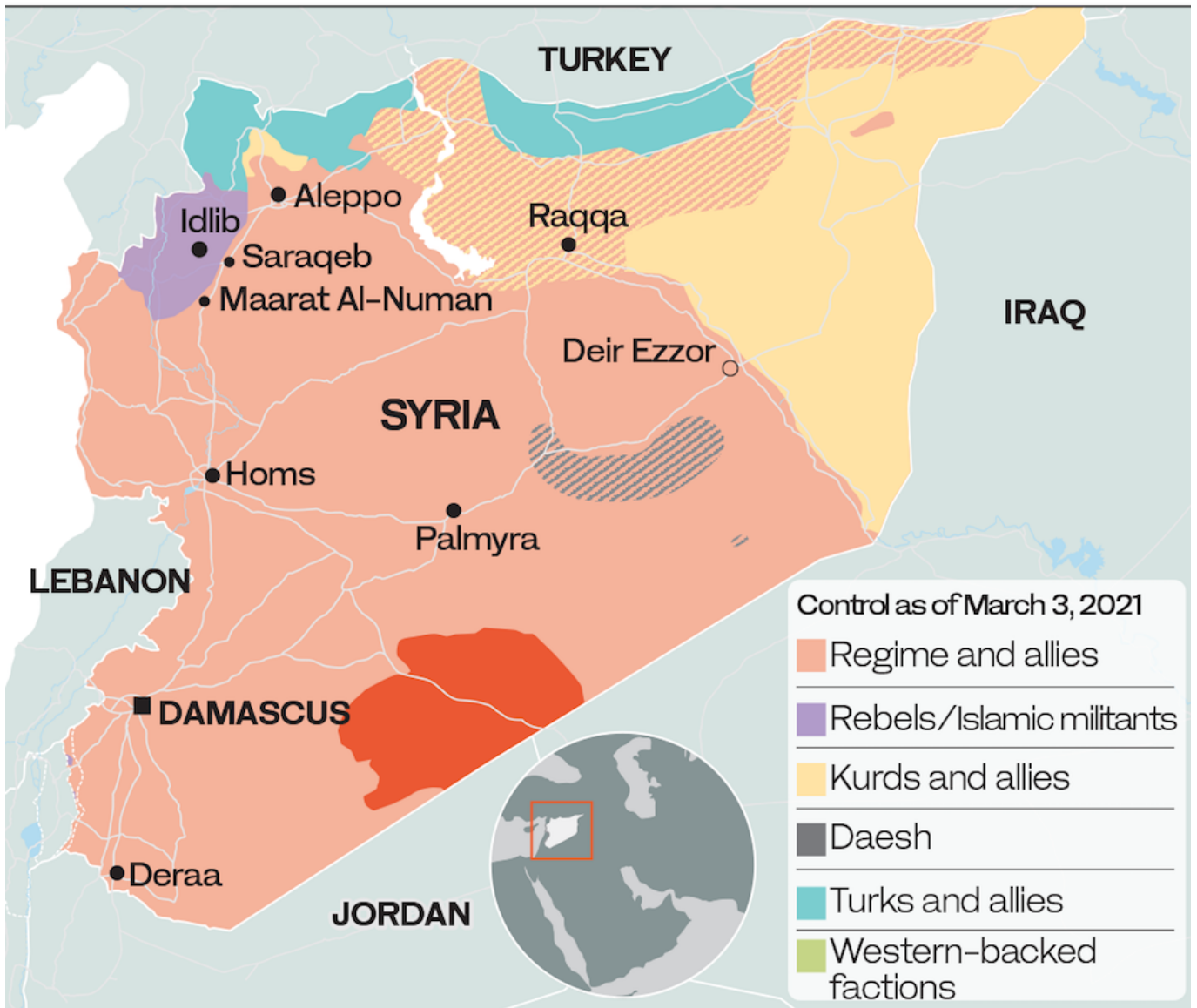
Although several states lately have tried to bring the regime back into the Arab fold, even opting to reopen their embassies in Damascus, Syrian President Bashar Assad's dependence on his Russian and Iranian benefactors has only continued to grow.

Indeed, Russian President Vladimir Putin received Assad in Moscow in September for the first time since 2018, no doubt to assist his Syrian counterpart's rehabilitation but also to rebuke Turkey and the US for their ongoing involvement in Syria.

Assad's reliance on Russia and Iran is owed in large part to the parlous state of Syria's economy, the crippling effects of Western sanctions, the country's diplomatic isolation, its military vulnerabilities, de facto partition, and the lack of popular support.

SYRIA: A DIVISION OF THE SPOILS

Political situation 10 years after the outbreak of civil war



Sources: SOHR, AFP bureaux

ARAB NEWS

Syria is geographically fractured between regime-held areas, rebel holdouts in the northwest, and Kurdish self-administration in the northeast, making the distribution of aid – particularly COVID-19 vaccines – all the more difficult.

Russian, Turkish and American forces stationed in Syria have maintained an uneasy standoff, with the cracks between their respective spheres of influence filled by mercenaries, traffickers and the increasingly emboldened remnants of Daesh.

Many Syrian cities still lie in ruins and millions of citizens remain displaced, internally and externally, often in precarious circumstances, too terrified to return home and face the regime's retribution.

A report published in September by Amnesty International, titled "You're Going to your Death," documented a catalog of horrific violations committed

by the regime against Syrians who were forced to return after seeking refuge in Europe.



A man evacuates a young bombing casualty after a reported air strike by regime forces and their allies in the extremist-held Syrian town of Maaret Al-Numan. (AFP/File Photo)

The scale of the regime's crimes was hammered home in November when Omar Alshogre, a 25-year-old former regime detainee and torture survivor, addressed a UN Security Council meeting on the prevailing impunity in Syria and the need to ensure accountability.

"We have stronger evidence today than what we had against the Nazis at Nuremberg," said Alshogre. "(We) even know where the mass graves are located. But still no international court and no end to the ongoing slaughter for the civilians in Syria."

A report in September by the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic concluded that thousands of detainees have been subjected to "unimaginable suffering" during the war, including torture, death and sexual violence against women, girls and boys.

The sentencing by a German court in Koblenz in February of former Syrian intelligence agent Eyad Al-Gharib to four and a half years in prison on charges of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity has been hailed as historic.



A Russian military police vehicle patrols the M4 highway in the northeastern Syrian Hasakeh province on the border with Turkey, on February 22, 2020.
(AFP/File Photo)

Nevertheless, few Syrians believe they will ever obtain justice for the abuses of the past decade, nor do they hold out much hope of an improvement in the humanitarian situation.

Indeed, during the closing months of 2021 thousands of Syrians lined up at Damascus airport having paid thousands of dollars to a Belorussian travel agency to fly them to a remote wilderness on the border with the EU in the desperate hope of starting a new life.

"The situation in Syria is quieter now but that doesn't mean it is better," Asaad Hanna, a Syrian activist and refugee, told Arab News. "In the regime-held areas, people are living from one day to the next. They can't meet their basic needs. The economy is collapsing and the currency is losing its value

"The Assad regime is still arresting anyone who complains, so people who are suffering are leaving the country. Imagine: since 2011, those finishing their studies have either been drafted into the army or have left the country."



A fireball erupts from the site of an explosion reportedly targeting a joint Turkish-Russian patrol on the strategic M4 highway, near the Syrian town of Ariha. (AFP/File Photo)

In Hanna's view, the country is going the way of other international pariahs.

"With the increase in poverty, 10 years of destruction, Syria is getting the kind of stability of North Korea," he added.

In northwest Syria, on the other side of the dividing line between the Assad regime and the last remaining rebel holdouts, 2021 was yet another year filled with tragedy, as schools, hospitals and even displacement camps were targeted in air and artillery attacks.

Mousa Zidane, who works for the rebel-affiliated Syrian Civil Defense, also known as the White Helmets, said 2021 was a difficult year for first responders.

"The bombing and deaths continued despite the ceasefire decision," he told Arab News. "The coronavirus invaded the IDP (internally displaced persons) camps and cities of Syria. The burden on us was great.



A displaced Syrian child, one of thousands who fled their homes in the countryside of Raqa and Deir Ezzor, carries a bag of recyclable garbage. (AFP/File Photo)

“In addition to all of that, the regime and Russia’s attacks on us continued. Three of my colleagues in the White Helmets died as a result of direct attacks targeting our teams while performing their humanitarian missions, and more than 14 other volunteers were injured.”

The near-daily bombardment of rebel-held areas has drained the public’s morale, Zidane said, leaving people with little hope of change this year.

“Although we have always searched for hope, we doubt the coming year will be better for the Syrians,” he said. “But we do not lose hope in ourselves and we do not lose hope in the true friends of Syria and the Syrians. We will continue our work and our rightful demands.”

Like many Syrians, Hanna believes the Assad regime is unlikely to ever face justice for the killing of protesters, the bombardment of civilian areas, the torture and killing of opponents, or the alleged use of chemical weapons.



White helmets in Idlib. (Twitter: @syriacivildef)

“Obviously, the international community is not interested in starting an accountability track right now but that doesn’t mean we should stop. It gives us more responsibility to keep pushing for justice and accountability for the Syrian people.”

Hanna fears the Biden administration’s openness to easing sanctions against the regime, and the recent diplomatic overtures by Arab countries, mean international pressure for regime change in Syria is all but finished. Indeed, Damascus might very well regain its seat in the Arab League.

“I only see that as a result of the new Democratic administration in the US,” Hanna said. “The previous one was clear about no relations with the Assad regime. But now we see Biden’s administration softening their position on everything Iran-related.”

Of course, almost everything in Syria remains Iran-related. Militias armed and funded by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps continue to solidify their hold over wide swaths of the country.



A man stands at the entrance of a barber shop next to a portrait of Syria's president Bashar Assad in the capital Damascus on December 15, 2021. (AFP)

A long-standing alliance between Tehran and Damascus has allowed Iran to use Syria to expand its regional influence and smuggle advanced munitions. Lebanese Hezbollah, another Iranian proxy, has likewise played a decisive role in staving off a rebel victory over the embattled Assad regime.

Iran's exploitation of Syria has drawn the attention of Israel, which is increasingly at odds with Washington's more conciliatory approach to Tehran.

In December, Israel twice attacked suspected Iranian weapons shipments at the Syrian regime's Latakia port. The coming months could see many more unilateral Israeli strikes targeting Iran's regional interests.

Despite the suffering, setbacks and grim expectations for 2022, activists such as Hanna remain defiant.

"For me, personally, I don't consider this a job; it has become a way of life," he said. "As long as it goes on, we will keep supporting what we went into the streets for in 2011."

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Life in ruins: Ancient sites shelter Syria's displaced Youth exodus takes joy out of festivities in Syria