

Lebanon's president delivers veiled criticism of Hezbollah during televised speech

Mon, 2021-12-27 21:11

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun on Monday night criticized Hezbollah, without mentioning the party by name, for disrupting the work of the government.

"It is true that defending the homeland requires cooperation between the army, the people and the resistance, but the primary responsibility rests with the state," Aoun said during a televised speech.

"Only the state sets the defense strategy and ensures its implementation. Before reaching this point, it must stop deliberate, systematic and unjustified disruption that leads to the dismantling of institutions and the dissolution of the state."

Aoun also affirmed his desire for "the best relations with Arab countries, particularly with the Gulf states," and asked: "What is the justification for straining relations with these countries and interfering in matters that do not concern us?"

The alliance between the president's Free Patriotic Movement party and Hezbollah was strained last week when the Constitutional Council rejected an appeal submitted by the FPM against amendments to electoral laws that were approved by the Lebanese parliament but are opposed by Aoun's team. The appeal would have limited the right of expatriates to vote, by limiting them to voting for six new seats specifically for non-residents rather than existing seats in the 128-member legislature.

In a speech following the council's decision, FPM leader Gibran Bassil denounced Hezbollah. It had been expected that Aoun would be similarly critical of the party and blame it for the disruption of government.

Earlier on Monday, Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi announced that he had signed a decree to hold parliamentary elections on May 15. Parliament had recommended the election take place on March 27, but Aoun objected to this date and demanded it be moved to May.

In his speech, the president called for "an urgent national dialogue for understanding on three issues: The expanded administrative and financial decentralization, the defense strategy, and the plan for financial and economic recovery."

While keen to avoid a complete breakdown of relations with Hezbollah, he indirectly accused the party of responsibility for disrupting the operations of the state.

"I do not want to quarrel with anyone, neither people nor parties, and I do not want to dismantle the unity of any sect," Aoun said.

But he added that he would not "accept to be a witness to the fall of the state and suffocation of people, and I will continue to work until the last day of my tenure and the last day of my life to prevent this.

"The solution lies through dialogue and peaceful means, and its beginning is in the meeting and work of the Council of Ministers and all state institutions."

He stressed that "it is necessary for the government to meet today ... and the parliament should monitor its work and not contribute to its disruption. The disruption of the government is responsible for the paralysis of the administration."

The president stressed that "only the state sets and implements the defense strategy, and the deliberate, systematic and unjustified obstruction must stop."

Aoun criticized the disruption to the state caused by demands by Hezbollah and the Amal movement to halt Judge Tarek Bitar's investigation into the causes of the Beirut port explosion in August 2020.

"By which Shariah, logic or constitution is the council of ministers suspended and it is asked to take a decision that is not within its powers, and its work is suspended due to an issue that does not constitute a charter dispute?" he asked

He concluded by saying that he was delivering "a frank message and I hope I will not have to say more."

Aoun's speech coincided with a campaign on social media and news sites in protest against incidents on the road to Beirut airport, where Hezbollah has raised banners and images in support of Iran's leaders, in particular former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, in the run-up to the second anniversary of his assassination by a US drone strike on Jan. 3, 2020.

Activists describe the banners and photos as a "provocative scene for every Lebanese, and specifically for Lebanese expatriates returning to Lebanon for the holidays."



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Life comes full circle for Lebanese filmmaker with 'Memory Box' Lebanon's young at risk of domestic violence, abuse

[EU diplomat says 'difficult' Iran nuclear talks resume with Tehran focused on sanctions relief](#)

Mon, 2021-12-27 21:10

VIENNA: Negotiators trying to save the landmark Iran nuclear deal resumed discussions on Monday with the EU chair warning of "difficult" work ahead. Negotiations to salvage the 2015 agreement restarted in late November, after a five-month hiatus following the election of ultraconservative Iran President Ebrahim Raisi.

The talks seek to bring back the US, after it left the accord in 2018, and

curtail Iran's nuclear activities, stepped up in response to the US withdrawal and reimposed sanctions.

EU diplomat Enrique Mora, who is chairing the talks, said all sides were showing "a clear will to work toward the successful end of this negotiation."

"If we work hard in the days and weeks ahead we should have a positive result... It's going to be very difficult, it's going to be very hard.

Difficult political decisions have to be taken both in Tehran and in Washington," the talks' coordinator, Mora told a news conference.

He was speaking shortly after a meeting of the remaining parties to the deal – Iran, Russia, China, France, Britain, Germany and the European Union – formally kicked off the round on Monday evening.

"There is a sense of urgency in all delegations that this negotiation has to be finished in a relatively reasonable period of time. Again, I wouldn't put limits but we are talking about weeks, not about months," Mora said.

He said the talks will discuss US sanctions-lifting and Iran's atomic commitments in parallel despite comments by Tehran and Beijing suggesting sanctions would be the focus.

"We are working on both tracks in parallel ... We are not working on one side and forgetting or neglecting the other. On the contrary, both tracks are mutually reinforcing," Mora added.

Ahead of the resumption, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the agenda should be "the issue of guarantees and verification" on the lifting of US sanctions.

"The most important thing for us is to reach a point where we can verify that Iranian oil will be sold easily and without any limits, that the money for this oil will be transferred in foreign currency to Iranian bank accounts, and that we will be able to benefit from all the revenues," he said, quoted by state news agency IRNA.

The talks involve delegations from Iran and the other countries that remain party to the landmark accord – Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia. Washington is participating indirectly, with diplomats shuttling back and forth between the Iranian and the US sides.

Iran has reported progress in the talks, but European diplomats have warned they are "rapidly reaching the end of the road."

US negotiator Rob Malley has said there are only "weeks" left to revive the deal, if Iran continues its current pace of nuclear activities.

The seventh round of talks, the first under Iran's new hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, ended 10 days ago after adding some new Iranian demands to a working text. Western powers said progress was too slow and negotiators had "weeks not months" left before the 2015 deal becomes meaningless.

The deal offered Iran a lifting of economic sanctions in return for strict curbs on its nuclear program.

The goal was to make it practically impossible for Iran to build an atomic bomb, while allowing it to pursue a civilian nuclear program.

But the deal started to unravel in 2018 when former US president Donald Trump pulled out and began imposing sanctions on the Islamic republic.

US President Joe Biden has said he is willing to return to the deal as long as Iran also resumes the original terms.

Iran, which denies it wants to acquire a nuclear arsenal, has gradually abandoned its commitments to the accord since 2019, including by stepping up its enrichment of uranium.

Iran's arch-rival Israel, which staunchly opposes the nuclear deal, had reportedly warned in November that the Islamic republic had taken the technical steps to prepare to enrich uranium to military-grade levels of around 90 percent.

"Stopping Iran's nuclear program is the primary challenge for Israeli foreign and security policy," Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said on Monday. "We prefer to act through international cooperation, but if necessary, we will defend ourselves, by ourselves."

On Saturday, Atomic Energy Organization of Iran director Mohammad Eslami said Tehran has no plans to enrich uranium beyond 60 percent, even if the Vienna talks fail.

Eslami said the enrichment levels were related to the needs of the country, in remarks published by the Russian news agency RIA Novosti.

Mora said he decided to reconvene the talks during many officials' holidays between Christmas and the New Year so as not to lose time, but he added that talks would stop for three days as of Friday "because the facilities will not be available," referring to the luxury hotel hosting most meetings. They are expecting to resume Monday next week.

Moscow's ambassador to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said on Twitter that negotiators "held businesslike and result-oriented discussions."

"In particular they agreed to intensify the drafting process in order to achieve an agreement ASAP," he said.

Earlier Monday, he said it was the "presumably final round of negotiations."
(With AFP and Reuters)



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[Egyptian, Jordanian, Palestinian officials meet](#)

Mon, 2021-12-27 20:37

CAIRO: A meeting in Cairo between Egyptian, Jordanian and Palestinian officials on Monday discussed ways to enhance relations, developments related to the peace process, and efforts to strengthen Palestinian unity.

The participants were the country's intelligence chiefs, the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan, and Hussein Al-Sheikh, a member of the central committee of the Palestinian faction Fatah.

During the meeting, which comes within the framework of existing tripartite coordination, Al-Sheikh reviewed Israeli escalation and violations against the Palestinian people, and the crimes carried out by settlers under the protection of Israel's military.

He said these practices show Israel's deliberate disregard for the decisions of the international community.

The meeting's final statement stressed the need to consolidate calm and reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, and to find a political horizon to achieve a just and comprehensive peace on the basis of the two-state solution between Israel and Palestine.





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[Abu Dhabi announces new COVID-19 restrictions at social events](#)

Mon, 2021-12-27 00:44

RIYADH: Abu Dhabi announced it was updating its COVID-19 guidelines for holding indoor and outdoor social events from Monday, in an effort to reduce the number of daily infections, the emirate's media office said on Sunday. The Abu Dhabi Emergency, Crisis and Disasters Committee said "updates include reducing operating capacity of social events such as weddings, funerals and

family gatherings, to a maximum of 60 percent” capacity. Up to 50 people are permitted at indoor events, and attendees at outdoor events and open-air activities should not exceed 150, while social events at home should not host more than 30 people.

Abu Dhabi Emergency, Crisis and Disasters Committee has updated measures to host indoor and outdoor social events and family celebrations, effective 27 December 2021, enhancing precautionary measures to protect public health. pic.twitter.com/v0tsflyd6S

– مكتب أبوظبي الإعلامي (@admediaoffice) [December 26, 2021](https://twitter.com/admediaoffice/status/1484444444444444444)

“Entry to social events requires adherence to existing precautionary measures, including showing green pass on Alhosn app, presenting a negative PCR test result received within 48 hours, and wearing masks while observing physical distancing protocol,” the new guidelines say. The committee said it will increase inspection and monitoring tours to ensure all preventive and precautionary measures are being implemented and urged those eligible to receive a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and maintain green status on Alhosn app through regular PCR testing.



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[French arrest man over chemical weapons parts in Syria](#)

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Sun, 2021-12-26 00:07

PARIS: A French-Syrian man has been detained by French police on suspicion of supplying components for the manufacture of chemical weapons in Syria through his shipping company, sources briefed on the case told AFP Sunday.

The man, who was born in 1962 and lives abroad, was arrested Saturday in the south of France according to one of the sources.

He has been held on suspicion of "conspiracy to commit crimes against humanity, accessory to crimes against humanity and accessory to war crimes," a judicial source told AFP.

The war in Syria has killed close to half a million people and spurred the largest conflict-induced displacement since World War II.

Syria denies the use of chemical weapons. It insists it handed over its weapons stockpiles under a 2013 agreement with the US and Russia, prompted by a suspected sarin gas attack that killed 1,400 in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta.

But Syria was stripped of its Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) voting rights in April after a probe blamed it for further poison gas attacks.

It will remain suspended until it has fully declared its chemical weapons and weapons-making facilities.



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Israeli official says Syria must not have chemical weapons