

Egypt, US hold first strategic dialogue since 2015

Tue, 2021-11-09 20:43

CAIRO: In the countries' first strategic dialogue since 2015, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam crisis, the water crisis facing Egypt, and developments in Libya and Syria.

The two ministers also met to discuss advancing bilateral cooperation and strategic relations between the two countries.

"We are committed to friendship with the US, and the partnership between the two countries is important for maintaining peace and stability in the region," the Egyptian FM said during a joint press conference.

Shoukry praised the American role in supporting his country during the war against terrorism and extremism, noting that Cairo has been able to resume its role as a major player in the region because of the US.

During the joint press conference, Blinken said Cairo plays a pivotal role in pushing for the peace process and holding elections in Libya.

Blinken said the two countries also share the same concerns about Iran's practices in the region and the world. The US also encouraged a peaceful solution to the Renaissance Dam issue while taking into account Egypt's water needs.

Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmed Hafez said Shoukry stressed the need to resume the course of negotiations as soon as possible with the aim of reaching a binding legal agreement on filling and operating the dam to achieve the interests of the three countries involved.

Blinken also talked about the need to remove foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya and praised Cairo's role in that issue. He stressed the importance of holding the Libyan elections as scheduled, next December.

Hafez said the meeting also dealt with a number of international and regional issues of common interest, including the state of emergency in Sudan, developments in Palestinian and Egypt's continuous efforts to revive the peace track.

In a previous statement, Shoukry said the strategic dialogue between the two countries would address the most prominent regional and international issues of mutual interest, within the framework of continuing consultations with the American side on issues of joint interest.

The US-Egypt strategic dialogue was established in 1998 during the administration of former US President Bill Clinton. There was a pause from 2009 to 2015 with the beginning of the administration of former US President

Barack Obama and the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011.



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US shares with Egypt concerns about Iran's malign practices: Blinken
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[El-Sisi and Macron discuss Libya](#)

Tue, 2021-11-09 19:39

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron both stressed the importance of maintaining stability in Libya in order to hold elections on schedule, in addition to the exit of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libyan territory.

The Egyptian presidency said in a statement that Sisi received a phone call from Macron to discuss the ongoing preparations for the international conference on Libya in Paris later this month.

The statement noted that the two presidents agreed to support the existing political track, leading to the election on its scheduled date at the end of next month, and to put a stop to the illegal foreign interventions that were fueling the crises in the country.

According to the statement, Macron indicated that France appreciates Egypt's efforts to resolve the issues in Libya and stressed France's keenness to cooperate with Egypt on this important file.

The two presidents also exchanged their views on regional and international issues of common interest, including developments in Sudan. They agreed on the importance of addressing the current challenges in Sudan in a way that achieves stability and security while preserving the democratic path of the current political process.

The international community is pinning its hopes on the Libyan presidential and parliamentary elections according to the road map set by the UN in order to bring an end to the chaos that has plagued the country since 2011, after the overthrow of the late President Muammar Qaddafi.



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[UAE foreign minister meets with Bashar Assad in Damascus](#)

Tue, 2021-11-09 19:39

DAMASCUS: The UAE foreign minister met with Syria's President Bashar Assad in Damascus Tuesday, according to Syrian state media.

Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed's visit is the first by a top Emirati official since Syria's war began a decade ago.

"President Assad received UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed," along with an accompanying delegation, the official SANA news agency said.

"During the meeting, they discussed bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries and ways to develop cooperation in different sectors that are of common interest," SANA added.

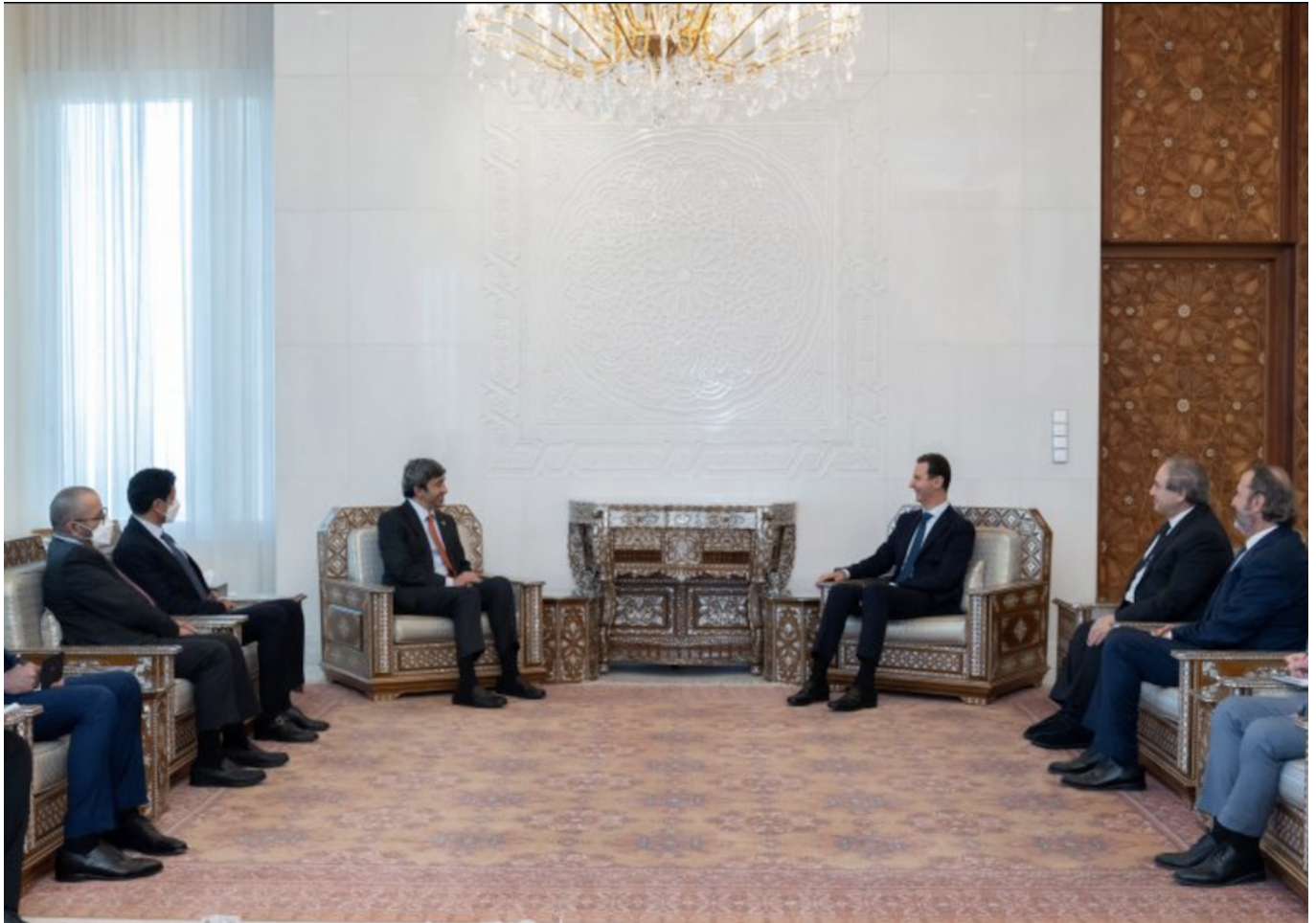
The UAE broke ties with Syria in February 2012 after protests demanding regime change escalated into an all-out conflict.

However, in December 2018, the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus and this was followed by the Gulf country calling for Syria to return to the Arab League in March.

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed also held a phone call with Assad in October.

Following his visit to Damascus, Sheikh Abdullah arrived in Amman on Tuesday evening ahead of a meeting on Wednesday with Jordan's deputy prime minister and foreign minister Ayman Safadi.





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Caesar Act sends Syria's Bashar Assad a stark reality check

[Lebanese bank workers let go as currency crash bites](#)

Tue, 2021-11-09 00:08

BEIRUT: Lebanese banks are quietly letting employees go as they seek to close branches and reduce operational costs amid the collapse of the local currency, the Lebanese pound.

It comes after the country's central bank tightened regulations against

commercial banks.

While some are downsizing domestically, other banks are opting to sell assets abroad.

The number of branches estimated to have closed ranges between 300 and 400 out of a total 1,100. Employees and contractors have been the first to feel the effects of the decisions.

George Al-Hajj, president of the Federation of Syndicates of Bank Employees, said that 2021 has been “very hard” for bank employees in Lebanon, adding: “Although no statistics have been conducted to show the exact number of laid-off employees, their number does not exceed 4,500.”

But more bank workers are expected to be dismissed in the near future.

“We are in the middle of the storm, and the crisis will persist until Lebanon reaches an agreement with the International Monetary Fund on the restructuring process of the banking sector,” said Al-Hajj.

The number of employees of the banking sector in 2018 was estimated to be about 26,000, working for 61 banks. Since 2019, the sector has lost more than 17 percent of its workforce.

Dr. Jassem Ajaka, an economic and strategic expert, warned that “up to 50 percent of bank employees will be laid off.”

He told Arab News: “After the deterioration of the economic situation and the suspension of banking activities due to the decision to block financial transfers, the banking sector is no longer making profits.

“Banks are not charities, and the reality is hard for everyone.”

“The banking sector’s employees constitute a very important share of the middle class in Lebanon and eradicating this group from the economy will further harm Lebanese society.”

Al-Hajj said: “In 2019, the federation saw this crisis coming and urged banks seeking to fire employees to inform the Ministry of Labor of their intentions. Some banks did, but others did not, and thus we do not know the exact number of laid-off employees.”

He added: “The banks’ excuses for mass lay-offs were many: Sometimes it was because the bank was applying an early retirement system, sometimes it was a resignation at a request from the administration, and other times it was the termination of contracts due to economic reasons.”

Many commercial banks are also offering a set of incentives for employees to voluntarily quit.

The average salary of a regular bank employee ranges between 2,000,000 and 2,500,000 Lebanese pounds – equivalent to \$100 today but \$1,500 before the economic crisis and collapse of the currency.

This year, the Lebanese Federation of Syndicates of Bank Employees issued new protocols on the financial rights of laid-off employees, but Al-Hajj warned that “banks have not been very receptive so far.”

The new rules state that “laid-off employees shall receive 18 monthly salaries as well as a bonus of two months’ salary for every year of employment up until six years; a one-and-a-half-month salary for every year of employment for those who served between six and 12 years; and a one-month salary for every year of employment for those who served more than 12 years and up until 44 years of employment.”

The previous dismissal protocol meant that laid-off employees only received 16 months’ salary in compensation for arbitrary dismissal.

However, some banks have chosen to compensate their employees with 24 months of salary in addition to other incentives, in order to avoid clashes with laid-off staff.

Al-Hajj said: “In addition to the mass layoffs, another problem that is as serious as the first one has emerged: The devaluation of employee salaries and its tragic repercussions on the living conditions of the Lebanese.

“This problem is only getting worse as the crisis continues and thus, the number of voluntary resignations by highly qualified employees is increasing.

“This will affect the future of the banking sector. Unfortunately, the migration of these people cannot be prevented unless by reconsidering their salaries, which have become worthless.”

Bechara Al-Asmar, head of the General Labor Union, estimated that the number of laid-off employees in Lebanon “since the economic crisis and the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic numbers more than 500,000 people.”

The Lebanese Observatory for Workers and Employees Rights has also said that between 500,000 and 800,000 workers have lost their jobs, forcing the country’s unemployment rate to surge above 50 percent.

It said that of the public sector, military and security employees who have kept their jobs, most have lost about 90 percent of the value of their salaries.

The observatory said that “325 institutions submitted requests to the Ministry of Labor to dismiss employees at the start of 2020.”

It noted the first wave of mass layoffs mainly targeted workers in the tourism sector. The crisis then extended to small enterprises and the country’s sizable black market.

“The second wave hit the education sector, where more than 2,000 teachers were laid off in 2020, according to the Teachers Syndicate in Private Schools, and their salaries were cut by 40 percent as many students left private education and were enrolled in public schools.”

The observatory said that the mass layoffs also affected “major businesses and institutions that were supposedly solid enough to bear the effects of the crisis, such as the American University of Beirut, which fired more than 1,200 workers, The Coca-Cola Company, which fired 350, and Adidas, which fired 250.”

The multinational retail franchise operator Al-Shaya Group also shut most of its companies in Lebanon and fired employees, the observatory said.

The layoffs also affected “domestic workers and non-Lebanese workers from Asia and Africa, as employers were no longer able to pay them in US dollars.

Vulnerable groups were also affected, such as daily laborers and Palestinian refugees, whose numbers are hard to estimate as they are not registered within the social security fund or at the Ministry of Labor,” the observatory added.



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Lebanese banks swallow at least \$250m in UN aid
Two Lebanese banks deny ties to Hezbollah lender

Rare Golan Heights movie is highlight of Palestinian film festival

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Tue, 2021-11-09 00:11

RAMALLAH: A rare film to be shot in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights proved a highlight of this year's six-day Palestine Cinema Days festival that ends on Monday, with hundreds flocking to watch the movie that has Syria's civil war as its backdrop.

"The Stranger" tells the story of Adnan, a resident of the Golan who feels like an outsider in his own community but finds a new sense of purpose in helping a man who arrives in the territory after being wounded in the Syrian conflict.

Director and screenwriter Ameer Fagher Eldin said Adnan's experience is that of many Syrians separated from their home country in the Golan, territory that Israel captured in a 1967 war and later annexed in a move not recognized internationally.

"We live (in the Golan) on the border fence with our homeland. Imagine hearing the echoes of war but not seeing the war for 10 years," he said of the civil war in President Bashar Assad's Syria that erupted in 2011.

Fagher Eldin told Reuters that that experience had prompted him to ask "who do these wars belong to ... and is it a war inside of us or not."

At the start of Palestine Cinema Days, now in its eighth year, actors and filmmakers posed on the red carpet outside Ramallah's Cultural Palace in the occupied West Bank, in scenes typical of film festivals everywhere.

But unlike them, this festival is held across six cities often separated by borders and checkpoints. The films were seen in the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, Nazareth and Haifa, and audiences included members of Israel's Arab minority who regard themselves as Palestinian citizens of Israel.

"We want to reach our audience in the different cities and towns," said festival spokesperson Khulood Badawi.

"We want to give them this opportunity to go back to the cinema and to revive cinema culture in these cities despite the obstacles that the Israeli occupation is imposing."

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 conflict and cites security concerns in maintaining checkpoints across the territory.

Among other films screened at the 2021 festival was "Bread and Butter," which documents the precarious commute, via crowded checkpoints, of Palestinians to jobs in Israel and of those without work permits who are smuggled into the country.

"Cinema is a tool, to raise our voices, to tell our story, our narrative," said Badawi.



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