

Mikati urges Kordahi to prioritize national interest over populist slogans

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BEIRUT: Lebanon's Prime Minister Najib Mikati on Thursday again called on Information Minister George Kordahi to resign to avoid further escalation with the Gulf.

He urged him to put national interests first and not to "disrupt the government's work and waste more time."

Mikati also had stern words on Thursday for his partners in government, Hezbollah and its allies, for exacerbating Lebanon's diplomatic spat with various Gulf states.

He stressed that "the country is not run by defiance, arrogance, raised tones, and threats, but rather a common discourse that unites the Lebanese people so they can work together on saving Lebanon."

Mikati also gave what seemed to be a strongly-worded speech against Hezbollah and its allies.

"Anyone who thinks they can impose their opinion by impeding work and verbal escalation is wrong," said Mikati.

"Anyone who thinks they can impose on the Lebanese choices that steer them away from their history, their Arab depth, and their close ties with the Arab countries and the Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia, is also wrong."

Mikati returned on Wednesday from Glasgow, after participating in the COP26 summit, on the sidelines of which he held a series of meetings with international officials regarding the diplomatic and economic crisis between Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

The row was triggered by statements Kordahi made before becoming a minister, in which he offended Saudi Arabia and defended the Houthis in Yemen.

Speaking to Al-Mayadeen TV, Kordahi responded to Mikati's request, saying that he will not resign and that his position has not changed.

On Thursday, Mikati met separately with President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and briefed them on the talks he held on the sidelines of COP26.

He said that he and Aoun agreed on a roadmap to exit the current crisis with Gulf states.

Mikati noted: "When we formed this government after months of disruption,

delay, and missed opportunities, we announced that we are on a quick rescue mission to advance cooperation with international bodies and the International Monetary Fund, in addition to holding parliamentary elections.

“We believed that the painful reality that our country is experiencing would push everyone to let go of personal interests, and actively participate in the rescue mission, but this, unfortunately, did not happen.”

Mikati also commented on the Tayouneh incident and the decision of the ministers of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah to boycott the Cabinet until Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the investigation into the Beirut port blast, is removed from his post.

He also criticized “the approach of exclusivity and obstruction that the government was subjected to from within.”

He added: “One month in, we faced our first challenge as a government, as we were dragged into intervening in a judicial order that we have nothing to do with.

“We refused to interfere in the Beirut port blast probe but stressed the need for Bitar to correct his course, especially when it comes to trying presidents and ministers. But that was not enough for some people.”

Mikati noted: “We were in the process of finding a way to hold a Cabinet session, but we had to face a more difficult challenge in light of Kordahi’s personal views, which he had expressed before becoming a minister, and Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states decided to cut ties with Lebanon.”

The prime minister said: “The Cabinet is the natural place to discuss all issues of concern to the government, away from dictations, challenges, raised tones and threats. The Cabinet will never be a means to interfere in any matter that does not concern the government, and specifically in the work of the judiciary.”

Mikati called on “all ministers to show solidarity and adhere to the ministerial statement, which set the basic rules for the government’s work and policy. We are determined to deal with the relationship with Saudi Arabia and Gulf states based on sound rules.

“We will not allow political arguments to take over this issue. In this context, I call on Kordahi once again to follow his conscience, assess the circumstances, do what should be done, and prioritize national interest over populist slogans. I am betting on his patriotic sense to evaluate the situation and the interest of the Lebanese citizens and expats.”

The prime minister also stressed that “anyone who believes that obstruction is the solution” was misguided. “Everyone must realize that no party unilaterally speaks on behalf of Lebanon and the Lebanese people,” he added.

According to political observers, Mikati received international support during his stay in Glasgow.

Political writer Tony Francis told Arab News: “Those whom Mikati met in Glasgow asked him to assume his role as prime minister and that the ball is in his court and he must act. The international community will not accept the resignation of his government.”

Francis added: “Mikati’s stances are kind of adventurous, to which Hezbollah and its allies may not respond. Everything depends on what the Iranians want in the region, and they are exploiting all fronts to get what they want.

“On the other hand, we see that Iran has agreed to resume the nuclear negotiations in Vienna on Nov. 29. Mikati’s raised tone may be part of the Western response to the Iranians; all of this means that things will remain ambiguous and no solution will be reached before Nov. 29.”



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Rumors swirl over Erdogan's declining health after G20 hobble

Author:

Arab News

ID:

1636050953038349300

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LONDON: Allies of the Turkish president have denied that his health is in decline after footage emerged online of him appearing to struggle to walk.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 67, was filmed during Sunday's G20 Summit in Rome in which he appeared to be unsteady on his feet. The footage fueled speculation that Turkey's long-time ruler's health is in decline.

In the video, Erdogan is seen walking apparently unsteadily away after a photoshoot, before a number of guards rush to his aid and move a thin rope fence out of his path.

His allies have responded furiously to the rumors of his declining health, with his official spokesman Fahrettin Altun tweeting a video showing him walking normally at the G20 Summit.

Rumors of Erdogan having cancer, which he denied, have also proliferated over the years after he had growths – polyps – removed from his small intestines in 2011 and 2012.

Erdogan, sometimes dubbed the new “sultan” of Turkey, has dominated the country's politics for nearly two decades, first as prime minister in 2003 then as president in 2014.

But Turkey's declining economy and out-of-control currency inflation appear to be hurting his popularity.

In 2019, his party suffered several defeats in city mayoral elections, even after he had forced a re-run of the polling in Istanbul.



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Author:

Arab News

ID:

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LONDON: An alliance between Ankara and Addis Ababa is fueling concerns that Turkish drones will be used in Ethiopia's escalating civil war.

The military cooperation agreement was signed in August by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The terms of the deal have not yet been made public, but Reuters reported in October that Ethiopia had requested Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones, considered to be among the most effective munitions of their type in the world.

The conflict in Ethiopia recently entered a new phase after beginning over a year ago, when government forces recaptured the Tigrayan capital Mekelle from separatist Tigrayans.

Government troops were later expelled from Mekelle, and an offensive by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front was initiated beyond the state's borders, targeting Amhara and Afar provinces.

Recently, the TPLF announced that its new stated goal is to capture Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.

A UN report released on Wednesday concluded that all parties in the conflict had committed abuses, including war crimes.

The UN has also sounded the alarm over the humanitarian situation in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia, saying only 10 percent of aid meant for the province was ever delivered.

While neither Anakara nor Addis Ababa have publicly commented on the deal, last month Ethiopia-based journalist Martin Plaut was reportedly handed a fragment from a Turkish-manufactured guided bomb used against Tigrayan forces.

It cannot be conclusively determined from where it was fired, but Western experts said the missile from which the fragment came can be used by the Turkish drones, The Guardian reported.

Alex de Waal, director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University, told the newspaper: "The fighting is already at an intense scale and ferocity, with perhaps 100,000 soldiers already dead on the Ethiopian side. Five million civilians are in need of food aid as a result of the conflict, and yet Addis is still shopping for drones and other arms."

Turkey's drones themselves are expected to increase the ferocity of the fighting in Ethiopia and could destabilize other parts of Africa, experts have said.

"What we are seeing is the consequences of the international community not wanting to deal with drone proliferation," Chris Coles, from UK-based NGO Drone Wars, told The Guardian.

"Drones are heating up conflicts in the region because pilotless munitions lower the threshold for war. A country might be condemned for supplying boots on the ground to intervene in a conflict, but there is far less complaint if instead they are supplying drones."

Global demand for the Turkish drones spiked worldwide after their decisive use by Azerbaijan last year in its short-lived war with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

They are manufactured by Baykar Makina, whose Chief Technology Officer Selcuk Bayraktar is married to Erdogan's younger daughter.



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Author:

Ismira Luftia Tisnabidrata

ID:

1635986594862231600

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JAKARTA: Indonesia's president was on Wednesday hoping talks in the UAE would help provide a crucial investment shot-in-the-arm toward driving forward

plans to relocate his country's capital from Jakarta to the island of Borneo. Joko Widodo wants the switch to take place in early 2024 and was pinning his hopes on gaining Emirati financial backing for the \$34 billion project during his discussions in Abu Dhabi, Indonesian Ambassador to the UAE Husin Bagis told Arab News.

The southeast Asian nation's leaders have for decades proposed moving the capital from overcrowded and polluted Jakarta, and in 2019 Widodo announced that the relocation of the country's administrative center to East Kalimantan province would finally take place over the following years.

Under the plans, most government offices would move to Borneo, along with parliament, military, and police headquarters, while Jakarta would remain the country's financial and commercial hub.

In September, the government submitted a bill to parliament for the relocation to take place in the first half of 2024. Initially, the groundbreaking was expected in early 2021, but was stalled by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

To attract foreign investors to the new city, Widodo established a steering committee consisting of global figures, including Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, who he was due to meet on Wednesday. Bagis said: "I expect talks about the new capital development project would be on the table during their bilateral."

Widodo recently said his visit to Abu Dhabi would focus on strengthening ties with the UAE, particularly in trade and investment.

Investment was crucial for the capital project as only a fifth of the cost was intended to come from the state budget, with the rest generated from private funding.

The area earmarked for the new capital, 1,300 km away from Jakarta, covers 256,142 hectares of forest, and straddles the districts of North Penajam Paser and Kutai Kartanegara, close to two developed cities – Samarinda, the provincial capital of East Kalimantan, and Balikpapan, an oil and coal mining town.

The relocation idea, originally floated by Indonesia's first president in the 1960s, was announced by Widodo as a vision to build a smart, sustainable, "forest city" where 75 percent of the area would be allocated to green spaces, in contrast with the heavily polluted, traffic gridlocked Jakarta. The move was also aimed at igniting economic growth in the eastern half of Indonesia, which is significantly less developed than the densely populated island of Java in the western part of the archipelago.

However, with Widodo pushing to inaugurate the new capital before the end of his second term in 2024, critics have become more vocal as the country continued to reel from COVID-19 pandemic recession.

Opposition lawmakers, such as Suryadi Jaya Purnama from the Prosperous Justice Party, recently warned they would object to the plans if the government did not first focus on public health and economic recovery.

Nirwono Joga, an urban planner from Trisakti University in Jakarta, said there was too little time to complete a comprehensive feasibility study that should be conducted over at least five years.

"The move in 2024 would just be symbolic but the new capital would not be a living and functioning city since it would require a much longer process.

"It would be the best legacy for the president to leave a well-prepared master plan for a future capital move instead of pushing for a symbolic move

amidst the pandemic, a limited budget, and hasty preparation,” he added.



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Author:

AFP

ID:

1635985241782190200

Thu, 2021-11-04 03:18

NASIRIYAH: For the first time in Iraq, a new breed of representatives is entering parliament, born from a civil society movement fed up with the corruption that has long tarnished politics.

Among the newcomers is pharmacist Alaa Al-Rikabi, 47, whose party Imtidad (Extension) emerged in the aftermath of the October 2019 protest movement

against the entrenched political elite.

Imtidad positions itself as the "opposition" to governments that have emerged through an informal ethno-sectarian quota system that has been in place since the US-led invasion of 2003, Rikabi told AFP.

Despite campaigning with extremely limited finances, the party secured nine of the 329 seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives in the October 10 election, according to preliminary results.

"I'm aware that our size in parliament will not allow us a lot of leeway" to push a political agenda, Ribaki said, stressing that his party instead aims to perform a watchdog role.

"We will not participate in any government set up on the basis of quotas, so that we will be able to hold leaders to account," Rikabi said in his home in Nasiriyah, a flashpoint of protests in Iraq's mainly Shiite south.

Overall, big political blocs retained their dominance in the election, which was marked by a record abstention rate.

The biggest winner was the Sadrist movement, led by firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr. It took 70 seats, according to the results that are expected to be finalized within a few weeks.

Behind the scenes, there have been discussions over the formation of blocs to create a parliamentary majority that would distribute the upcoming Cabinet posts.

But it is specifically against this system that the protest movement, and by extension Imtidad, was forged.

Imtidad is seeking its own alternative alliance to make its presence felt. With only nine seats, the party "will not be able to extend its influence in parliament", said Saleh Al-Alawi, a judge and a political scientist.

Rikabi pointed out that, "according to the constitution, we need at least 25 MPs to be able to question a minister".

To this end, he said, "we are trying to come to an understanding" to team up with other parties.

In particular, Imtidad has been in talks with a small Kurdish party, the New Generation Movement, which has similar leanings and also holds nine seats.

The unprecedented protest movement that broke out two years ago railed against the political class running the oil-rich but poverty-stricken country where youth unemployment is soaring.

The streets of Nasiriyah still bear witness to the anger, and posters of the "martyrs" adorn the walls, honoring many of the hundreds of activists who paid with their lives.

Factions of the Hashd Al-Shaabi – a paramilitary group integrated into the armed forces and represented by the pro-Iran Fatah (Conquest) Alliance in parliament – have faced accusations of targeting activists.

Hussein Ali, 28, said he has been in a wheelchair for two years since being shot in the back during a demonstration.

"I voted for Imtidad because I hope they can fight for the rights of the demonstrators," he said. "Ever since I was injured, I haven't received any compensation from the government."

Unlike many established Iraqi politicians, newcomers like Rikabi have little money and had to run low-cost campaigns.

Imtidad spent 4 million dinars (about \$2,700) for posters and events in the province of Dhi Qar, of which Nasiriyah is the capital – a fraction of the tens of millions often spent by larger parties.

In a bid to break with what he calls the “stereotype of the representative,” who is out of touch with voters and with reality, Rikabi drives his own car and does not have an office.

Others have been even more frugal, such as Mohammed Al-Anouz, who came to be known on social media for putting up his own campaign posters in the Shiite shrine city of Najaf.

For him, opposition is the only option, he told AFP.

“The big parties have contacted me to find out my position,” he said. “I will not form an alliance with the parties that have led the country in past years.

“It is they who got us into this situation where there are no public services and corruption reigns.”



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