

Lebanon's FM sees possible breakthrough in diplomatic spat sparked by pro-Houthi minister

Sat, 2021-10-30 23:54

BEIRUT: Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdullah Bou Habib on Saturday expressed optimism that the diplomatic crisis triggered by the country's information minister would soon be resolved.

George Kordahi's statement – that Yemen's Houthis were only defending themselves – did not sit well with Saudi Arabia as well as Yemen's legitimate government and their allies, who have been fighting the Iran-backed militia since 2015.

The militia seized Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and other provinces from the UN-recognized government in 2014, prompting Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to organize a coalition to contain the threat. Since then, the Houthis had been launching ballistic missiles, rockets and armed drones against civilian targets in Saudi Arabia.

As the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement came to Kordahi's defense, the crisis worsened on Saturday, with [Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE recalling their ambassadors from Lebanon](#) in solidarity with Saudi Arabia. They also ordered Lebanon's ambassadors to leave their countries within 48 hours.

Habib's committee, tasked by Prime Minister Najib Mikati to resolve the crisis, failed to reach a way out of the scandal during the closed meeting it held on Saturday apparently due to objections by the Marada Movement, to which Kordahi is affiliated.

Richard Michaels, deputy head of the US mission in Lebanon, joined the meeting at Bou Habib's request but left the meeting half an hour later.

Mikati had asked Kordahi to resign on Friday night, but Marada Movement head Suleiman Frangieh objected.

"If I were to serve my personal and political interest, I would encourage Kordahi to resign as he has offered to submit his resignation at the Baabda Palace and in the Maronite Patriarchate, but I refused because my conscience does not allow me to ask this of a minister who did not make a mistake, but simply gave his opinion in a free country before he was appointed," he said.

Frangieh added: "We have a firm conviction of wanting excellent relations with the Arab countries. Our position regarding Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf countries is clear."

He refused to "sacrifice" Kordahi for anyone, saying that if the minister were to resign or be fired then the movement would not name a replacement.

Nonetheless, Habib mentioned a possible breakthrough in the coming hours. He also pointed to the participation of the US in resolving the crisis.

"I was the one who invited the American diplomat to join the meeting because the Americans can help in asking Saudi Arabia to find a way out," he said.

Habib dismissed Frangieh's comments as "political opinions that have nothing to do with our meeting, and we are working technically to solve the crisis."

US State Department spokesman Samuel Warberg told the Lebanese Al-Jadeed TV station: "The US urges the Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and countries in the region to communicate with the Lebanese government.

He said the US government was working with the international community to secure support for the Lebanese government. "We are waiting to see transparency and accountability on the government's part," he added.

'Adding fuel to the fire'

[Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit](#) expressed his "deep concern and regret over the rapid deterioration in Lebanese-Gulf relations, especially at a time when efforts were made to restore positive ties to help Lebanon overcome the challenges it is facing."

He said the Lebanese should have handled the crisis caused by Kordahi's comments "more carefully, instead of adding fuel to the fire."

Lebanese officials have tried to contain the diplomatic crisis, amid Hezbollah's insistence that Kordahi should not resign under the pretext of "preserving Lebanese sovereignty and national dignity," according to a party statement. This position was reiterated by a number of Hezbollah MPs on Saturday.

"Hezbollah and the Amal movement could make their ministers resign from the government if Kordahi were to do so," the Al Markazia news agency reported.

Former Lebanese Prime Ministers Fouad Siniora, Saad Hariri and Tammam Salam denounced "Kordahi's positions that violate the Arab, diplomatic and moral principles and norms."

They demanded that he immediately submit his resignation, as his ministerial position now posed "a threat to Lebanese-Arab relations and to Lebanon's interest."

They stressed the policy of disassociation they had adopted and warned against "joining the axis led by Iran in the region."

They said Hezbollah had been interfering and playing a destructive role since its involvement in Arab crises and wars, not to mention its involvement in the Yemen war waged by Iran against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

Hariri criticized "the reckless ideas in the name of sovereignty that lead Lebanon to an unprecedented Arab isolation, the price of which the Lebanese people are paying."

He said: "The responsibility, first and foremost, in this regard lies with Hezbollah, and its professed hostility toward the Arabs and the Arab Gulf states."

Hariri said: "You want a state with sovereignty and national dignity, so remove Iran's wing from Lebanon, put an end to arrogant policies and stop threatening the Lebanese with an army that outnumbers the state's army and its security and military institutions."

Hezbollah rules

Kataeb Party head Samy Gemayel believed Kordahi's comments were "proof" of how the country's political forces had "surrendered" to Hezbollah, allowing it to take over the presidency, government and parliament.

The diplomatic crisis between Lebanon and the Arab Gulf states coincides with one related to Lebanese exports to the Gulf, following the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying the Kingdom had banned all Lebanese imports.

According to statistics from the Lebanese Association of Agriculture, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries import 173,300 tons or 55.4 percent of Lebanon's total exports of vegetables and fruits.

This means Lebanon will lose \$92 million annually under this ban, which is the equivalent of \$250,000 per day.

Lebanese economic bodies have criticized "the misfortunes that unexpectedly come upon Lebanon, at a time when the Lebanese are suffering in various aspects of their lives and were waiting for an initiative from the government to pull Lebanon out of the gutter, not ruin Lebanese relations with the Gulf states that have constituted a strategic economic lever for Lebanon over the years."



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Arab League expresses concern over deterioration of Lebanese-Gulf relations
Saudi foreign minister says crisis with Lebanon has its origins in Hezbollah dominance

[Four children killed in Houthi mortar strike in Yemen](#)

Sat, 2021-10-30 19:38

AL-MUKALLA: Four children were killed and two more wounded when a mortar shell fired by the Iran-backed Houthis on Saturday struck a residential area in the city of Taiz, in southern Yemen, residents said.

The six children, belonging to the same family, were playing in front of their house when the shell exploded, Ahmed Mansour, a local medic, told Arab News by telephone.

Residents said the targeted area is not close to the battlefields or military bases under the government's control, adding that the shell was fired from a Houthi-controlled base east of Taiz.

The shelling is the latest in a series of deadly strikes by the Houthis on residential areas in Taiz that have killed dozens of civilians.

The attack came as local authorities in the central province of Marib announced that the death toll from the Houthi missile strike on the house of a tribal leader in Marib's Juba district on Thursday evening had risen to 13 civilians. The bodies of seven unidentified civilians have been retrieved from the debris of the house.

The tribal leader, Abdul Latif Al-Qibli Namran, who survived the attack, vowed to fight off the Houthi attacks in Marib province till they are defeated. "We will fight as long as we breathe till victory is achieved," he said.

Yemen's Prime Minister Maen Abdul Malik Saeed, who called Namran to offer his condolences, strongly condemned the Houthi attacks and vowed to make the Houthi militia "pay the price for crimes against civilians and the displaced," the official news agency SABA said.

Juba has a large concentration of internally displaced people who fled fighting or Houthi repression.

As fighting between the government troops and the Houthis intensified in the

district, local aid organizations and officials warned of a big humanitarian crisis as a large number of families are trapped with limited humanitarian assistance.

Local officials said on Saturday that the Houthi had intensified missile and mortar strikes on government-controlled areas in Juba to pave the way for their ground forces to advance.

Separately, the US special envoy for Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, on Saturday accused the Houthi of obstructing peace efforts to end the war and fueling the humanitarian crisis.

“Houthi escalation in Marib is not just an obstacle to peace, it is exacerbating a humanitarian situation already on the brink,” Lenderking said while discussing humanitarian crisis in Yemen with NGOs, according to the US State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.



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Arab coalition says 95 Houthis killed in strikes on Juba and Al-Kasarah More than 85 Houthis killed near Yemen’s Marib: Arab coalition

Children among 12 killed in Yemen car blast

Sat, 2021-10-30 18:38

ADEN: At least 12 civilians, including children, were killed Saturday in a car bomb blast near the airport of Aden, the Yemeni government's interim capital, security officials said.

"Twelve civilians were killed in an explosion" in the vicinity of Aden airport and "there are also serious injuries," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Another security official confirmed the toll.

A spokesman from the Southern Transitional Council (STC) – part of Yemen's government – said the blast was caused by a car bomb explosion.

"A car bomb was detonated, killing a number of our peaceful citizens, including children, and wounding a number of other civilians," STC spokesman Ali Al-Kathiri said in a statement.

The explosion comes almost three weeks after six people were killed in a car-bomb attack that targeted Aden's governor, who survived.

AFP footage on Saturday showed people pulling out a body from a vehicle that had been completely destroyed, as firefighters put out flames nearby.

The internationally recognized government relocated to Aden from the capital Sanaa in 2014, forced out by the Houthis, who are fighting Yemeni government loyalists.

An Arab military coalition intervened in Yemen's war in 2015.

No one has yet claimed responsibility for Saturday's blast, which is the deadliest in the area since December last year, when an attack targeting cabinet members ripped through Aden's airport.

At least 26 people, including three members of the International Committee of the Red Cross, were killed and scores were wounded when explosions rocked the airport at the time, as ministers disembarked from an aircraft.

All cabinet members were reported to be unharmed, in what some ministers charged was a Houthi attack.



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Yemen army deploys three brigades in Marib to counter Houthi attacks
Saudi aid agency carries out health projects in Yemen

[Hezbollah responsible for Lebanon's rift with Saudi Arabia, says former PM Hariri](#)

Sat, 2021-10-30 00:51

CAIRO: Lebanese former Prime Minister Saad Hariri said on Friday that Iran-backed Hezbollah was responsible for the rift with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

"The responsibility, first and foremost, in this regard lies with Hezbollah,

and its professed hostility toward the Arabs and the Arab Gulf states,” Hariri said in a tweet.

He issued the statement after [Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador from Lebanon](#) “for consultation” and ordered the Lebanese envoy in Riyadh to leave within 48 hours on Friday. Saudi Arabia also banned Lebanese products from the Kingdom.

Riyadh’s actions were in response to comments made by Lebanon’s Information Minister George Kordahi about the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. Kordahi, a former newscaster of the Saudi broadcast company MBC, said that the Yemen’s Houthi militia were only defending themselves against aggression.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and several other Arab states formed a coalition in 2015 to help restore Yemen’s legitimate government which was ousted by the Houthis. Since then, the Iran-backed militia had been launching ballistic missiles, rockets and explosive-laden drones against civilian targets in Saudi Arabia.

The dispute is the latest challenge to Prime Minister Najib Mikati’s cabinet which is already in political paralysis over a row around the Beirut port blast probe.

The rift risks widening to more Gulf states with Bahrain also asking Lebanon’s ambassador to leave shortly after the Saudi decision.

Mikati, in a phone call with Kordahi on Friday evening, asked him to put the national interest first and “take the right decision to fix Arab relations with Lebanon,” a statement by his office said.

Sources with knowledge of the matter had told Reuters the Saudi escalation was piling pressure on Kordahi to resign in order to avert further consequences.

Mikati earlier reiterated his government’s commitment to good relations with Saudi Arabia and called for Arab partners to put the latest crisis behind them but stopped short of announcing concrete action to remedy the crisis.

“We also appeal brotherly Arab leaders to work and help to overcome this crisis in order to preserve Arab cohesion,” the statement said.

Kordahi has said the show was recorded nearly a month before he took office and he would not resign over the incident, earning praises from the Hezbollah.

Mikati has been hoping to improve ties with Gulf Arab states which have been strained for years because of the influence wielded in Beirut by the Iran-backed Shiite group Hezbollah.

“The control of the terrorist Hezbollah on the decision-making of the Lebanese state made Lebanon an arena for implementing projects for countries that don’t wish Lebanon and its people well,” a Riyadh statement carried by SPA said.

In April, Saudi Arabia banned all fruit and vegetable imports from Lebanon blaming an increase in drug smuggling.

The ban added to the economic woes of Lebanon, already in the throes of one of the modern times' deepest financial crises.



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Saudi Arabia orders Lebanon envoy to leave, recalls its ambassador to countryMBC to close office in Lebanon and relocate to Saudi Arabia

[Renovations offer new view of ancient West Bank mosaic](#)

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Sat, 2021-10-30 00:07

WEST BANK: Tourists are being offered a new glimpse at one of the largest

ancient mosaics in the Middle East, after renovations undertaken by the Palestinian Authority were unveiled this week.

The 930-square-meter stone mosaic, with intricate geometric patterns, is part of what is known as Hisham's Palace. It was built during the reign of the Umayyads, the first hereditary Muslim dynasty, which ruled from Damascus. The palace was the winter resort of Caliph Hisham ibn Abd Al-Malik, who ruled from 724 to 743.

It is situated near the desert oasis city of Jericho – one of the world's oldest – in what is now the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Israel, which controls access to the territory, plans to welcome tourists from Nov. 1 as it lifts COVID-19 restrictions. The Palestinians hope the new project will attract both local and foreign travelers.

The \$18 million project, which included the construction of a large dome to protect the mosaic from the elements, was partly funded by the Japanese government. Tourists can now view the mosaic from a new walkway suspended above it.

The project was originally supposed to be completed in 2018 but was delayed, in part because of the challenge of anchoring the dome without disturbing the archaeological remains.

Abdel Raheem Zahran, a local tourist who came with his children on Thursday, said he had been to the site seven years earlier, but it was "not as developed."

"The dome that they made is great, you don't have the sun beating down on you, " he said.



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Newly premiered 'The Devil's Drivers' follows West Bank outlaws