

Five evacuation flights from Afghanistan carrying American citizens leave Kuwait for US

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LONDON: Five flights carrying more than 850 Americans and employees from the US embassy in Kabul have left Kuwait on their way home.

The US ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski thanked “our Kuwaiti partners, our dedicated diplomats and Department of Defense colleagues working around the clock to ensure US citizens and our partners get home safely.”

The US on Saturday urged its citizens in Afghanistan to avoid traveling to Kabul airport due to “potential security threats” near its gates.

“We are advising US citizens to avoid traveling to the airport and to avoid airport gates at this time unless you receive individual instructions from a US government representative to do so,” the US embassy alert said.

Conditions outside Hamid Karzai International Airport have been chaotic amid the crowds of people hoping to flee Afghanistan after the Taliban took control of the country a week ago.









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Thousands rally in London decrying Taliban takeover
What the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan means for volatile Iraq

What the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan means for volatile Iraq

Sat, 2021-08-21 21:15

IRBIL, Iraq: It is perhaps just a matter of time before the volatile states of the Middle East begin to feel the reverberations of the Taliban's swift conquest of almost all of Afghanistan. The implications of the Sunni Islamist group's triumph will not be lost on non-state actors and violent extremists active in the countries where the US still has troops.

Afghanistan's US-trained and equipped military failed to hold the line against the Taliban's lightning offensive, as city after city fell in rapid succession. The government in Kabul quickly collapsed, paving the way for a second era of Taliban rule, just under 20 years after the end of the first.

The principal lesson other militant groups will likely draw from America's bungled withdrawal from Afghanistan is this: If they can hold out long enough against the enemy's superior technology and firepower, the latter will eventually grow weary and withdraw, leaving its client regimes to crumble.



The Taliban's military success in Afghanistan is reverberating across the region. (AFP)

If this is the thinking among some Shiite militia leaders in Iraq, who have long demanded the departure of US forces, it can hardly be dismissed as pure fantasy. After all, there is a fairly recent precedent of a swift insurgent

offensive quickly overwhelming the Iraqi military.

Daesh was able to conquer a third of Iraq, including its second city Mosul, in the summer of 2014. The Iraqi army, which was much larger and better equipped, withdrew without a fight.

Although Baghdad was able to recapture the bulk of these territories by 2017, with extensive US support, the campaign against Daesh gave rise to a new force, Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces), which could prove capable of toppling the Iraqi government.

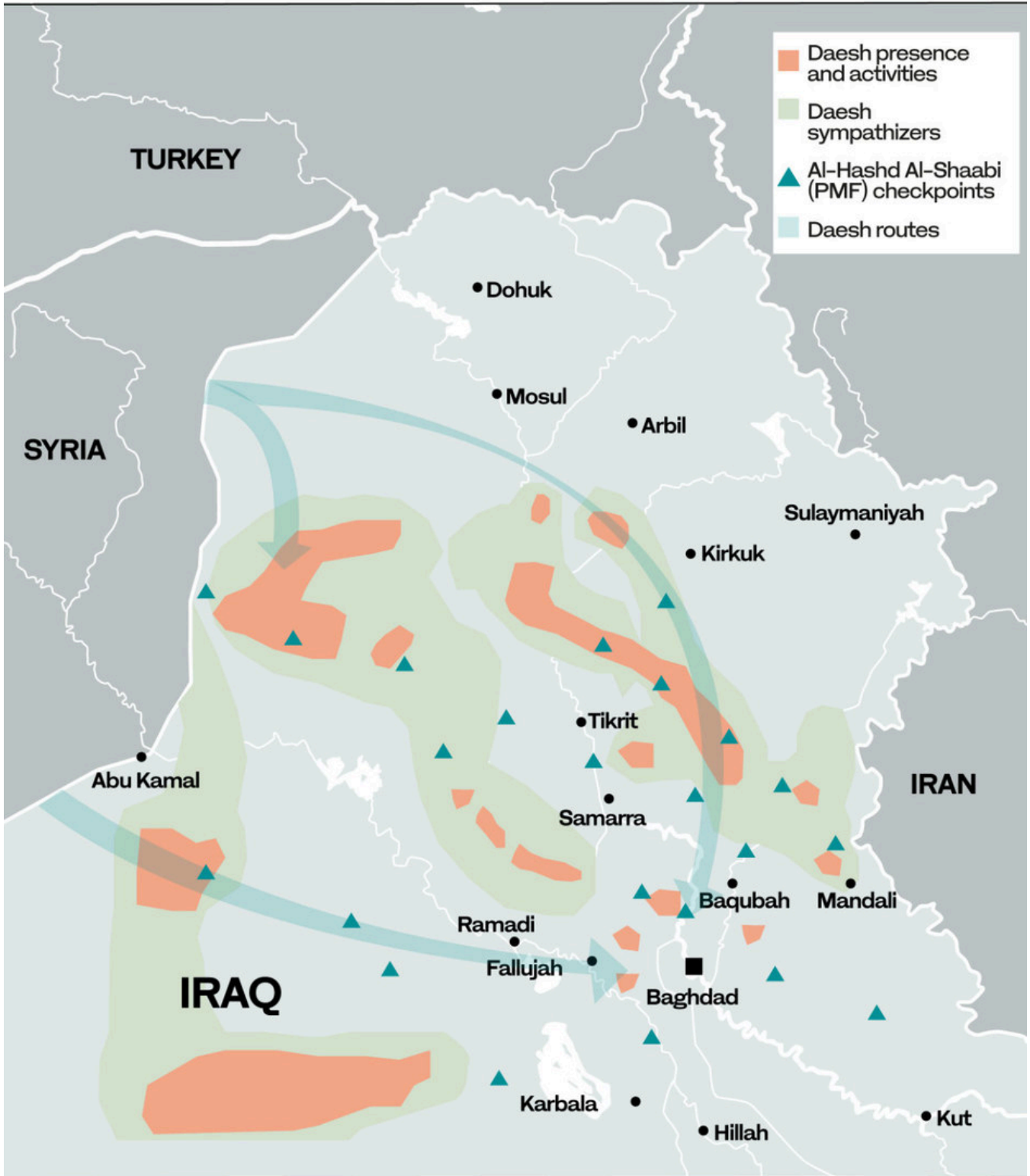
Hashd Al-Shaabi was formed in 2014 to help fight Daesh after the army's notorious failure to defend Mosul. The umbrella organization of predominantly Shiite militias went on to liberate large swathes of Iraq's predominantly Sunni regions, and was later incorporated into Iraq's security apparatus.

However, some of the more powerful factions within the Hashd have long been equipped and financed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to advance Iran's military and political objectives in the region.

Iraq watchers fear these factions may outgun the regular Iraqi army and morph into a powerful state within a state, resembling Hezbollah in Lebanon.

AL-HASHD AL-SHAABI CHECKPOINTS IN IRAQ

Militia's economic and military movements overlap with those of Daesh



Source: Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy

ARAB NEWS

They have at their disposal large stocks of Iran-supplied surface-to-surface missiles and armed drones, some of which have been used in recent years to attack US military targets within Iraq.

Fortunately for the Baghdad government, burdened with the task of balancing the interests of both its American and Iranian patrons, the Biden

administration does not look to be in as much of a hurry to withdraw from Iraq as it was from Afghanistan.

Moreover, according to political analysts, there are several major distinctions between the two cases that strongly suggest a Taliban-style takeover in Iraq by pro-Iran militias is probably not on the cards – at least not any time soon.

First and foremost, these factions have a lot to gain from maintaining the status quo. “The pro-Iran Hashd factions do not want to take over the government. Their goal is to join the ruling parties and get their cut of the state, both legal and illegal,” Joel Wing, author of the online blog Musings on Iraq, told Arab News.

“They are already an official part of the security forces, which means government funding. They want more fighters on the payroll. They want contracts and graft.”



Iraq's Hashd militias are an official part of the country's security forces and are funded by the government. (AFP)

Alex Almeida, an Iraq security analyst at energy consultancy Horizon Client Access, is also skeptical that Hashd will attempt a takeover.

“Barring a repeat of 2014, or some sort of militia coup scenario or a siege of the international zone (in Baghdad), it's highly unlikely we will see a similar situation develop in Iraq, primarily because with the militias we would be dealing with would be a rogue faction of the Iraqi state rather than an external takeover by an insurgent force,” he said.

Rodger Baker, senior vice president of strategic analysis at Stratfor at RANE, agrees and points out that many Hashd groups “are integrated into the security forces of Iraq, and not merely outside insurgents” like the Taliban fighters were in Afghanistan.

INNUMBERS

2014 Year Hashd Al-Shaabi was formed.

40 Groups under Hashd Al-Shaabi umbrella.

128,000 Strength of Hashd Al-Shaabi.

“They do not hold territory in the same way the Taliban did in Afghanistan, even if they operate in relatively defined geographic areas,” Baker said. “They have close alliances with elements of the Iraqi parliament.

“In short, at least with many of the larger Hashd groups, they are integrated into the Iraqi political and security infrastructure. Thus, they are not necessarily seeking the overthrow of the regime, but rather the assertion of their (and often Iran’s) interests in Iraq.”

Baker is also more confident about the capabilities of the Iraqi armed forces compared with the Afghan security forces, noting that Iraq’s military has “undergone a significant transformation since it largely collapsed amid the early Daesh offensive” in 2014.



Fortunately for Baghdad, the Biden administration does not appear to be in a hurry to withdraw from Iraq. (AFP)

“After that failure, the Iraqis and the US military underwent a significant

reform of training and leadership in the Iraqi security forces, and these forces largely proved their mettle several years later in their routing of Daesh from key cities and areas,” he said.

“There is today much more cohesion and sense of common purpose among the Iraqi security forces than there was among the Afghan security forces.”

There is another crucial difference between the current Iraq and (pre-Taliban takeover) Afghanistan situations. It is no secret that Pakistan’s powerful military intelligence agency, the ISI, has long supported the Taliban, often to the detriment of US strategic objectives.

However, unlike the ISI’s comparatively laissez-faire approach, Baker believes Iran holds its Iraqi militia proxies on a far shorter leash, dictating the limits of their activities.

“Iran’s support of the Hashd groups is much stronger than Pakistan’s support for the Taliban – likely stronger even than Pakistan’s Taliban support in the late 1990s,” Baker said.



A Hashd fighter walks past a poster depicting late Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (R) and Iranian IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad. (AFP)

Besides arming and training them, Iranian officials openly meet with elements of Hashd groups in Iraq. “This also may constrain the actions of the larger Hashd groups, as Iran is not necessarily seeking the overthrow of Iraq’s (government), and is definitely not seeking more destabilization,” Baker said.

“Rather, these groups are part of a collection of elements that Iran uses to maintain influence and protect its strategic interests in Iraq.”

Nevertheless, Baghdad should draw some broad lessons from events in Afghanistan to ensure it does not suffer a similar fate as Kabul, analysts say.

“Perhaps the most significant lesson is the importance of rooting out corruption in the government at all levels, and of ensuring cohesion among various ethnic, regional and sectarian groups in the government,” Baker said.

Afghanistan’s lack of internal cohesion was plain for all to see in the hours before Kabul fell. Several top officials, including President Ashraf Ghani, opted to flee the country, while others sought to negotiate with the approaching Taliban. Others still, such as Ahmad Massoud, armed themselves and headed for the mountains to launch another phase of resistance.

“The lack of cohesion and perception of corruption left many of the Afghan citizenry unable to trust the government. The same could be said about the bureaucracy and security forces,” Baker said.

Perhaps the most critical distinction between the two cases is that the US does not plan a complete withdrawal from Iraq anytime soon.

“The recent US-Iraq talks show that Washington is not planning on withdrawing from Iraq,” Wing said. “Attacks by pro-Tehran factions are complicating that because the Americans are focusing on protecting themselves rather than assisting the Iraqis right now. But even then, there’s no sign they want to end the mission.”



Placards denouncing the Hashd are shown during a demonstration by Iraqi Kurds outside the US consulate in Irbil, the capital of autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan.
(AFP file photo)

Almeida believes the disastrous retreat from Afghanistan “will make the Biden administration a lot more cautious about how it handles the mechanics of a further US withdrawal in Iraq, particularly drawing down to a small diplomatic footprint without in-country military support.”

For his part, Baker thinks the decision to leave Iraq “will be based more on the US strategic realignment of priorities than on the political fallout from the Afghan withdrawal, particularly as Iraq is in a much stronger shape than the Afghan government was.”

“The larger risk for Iraq is long-term regional and sectarian differences, and demands for greater federalism or distribution of power,” he said.

“Economic resources are spread unequally across Iraq, and these geographic differences will continue to shape the future security and stability environment.”

• *Twitter: @pauliddon*









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Taliban revenge killings heighten fears; 'no clear way out' alarms UNHow a new generation of Afghan Taliban fighters was forged under American fire

[Arab coalition airstrikes kill Iranian expert in Yemen's Marib](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-08-21 20:14

ALEXANDRIA: Arab coalition airstrikes have killed an Iranian military officer who was an adviser to the Iran-backed Houthis during their deadly offensive on the central province of Marib, Yemen's Information Minister, Muammar Al-Eryani, said on Saturday.

The advisor, Haidar Serjan, and nine other combatants were killed on Friday night in the coalition's airstrikes during fighting in Marib's Serwah district.

Serjan first offered military advice to the Houthis during battles along the country's western coast till June 5, 2012. He was sent to the Marib battlefields to replace Hezbollah military expert Mustaf Al-Gharwi, who was killed in another airstrike, Al-Eryani said.

"Iran has sent hundreds of Revolutionary Guards experts, led military operations in the field and smuggled various types of weapons, including ballistic missiles and drones, confirming the nature of the battle as an extension of Iranian expansionist and influence project in the region," the minister said on Twitter.

He demanded more international pressure on Iran to stop fueling violence in Yemen.

"We urge the international community, UN, and permanent Security Council members to adopt a firm stand against Iran's blatant interference in Yemeni affairs, its role in escalating military operations and undermining peace efforts, responsibility for bloodshed, and exacerbation of humanitarian suffering of Yemenis," Al-Eryani said.

Thousands of Houthis and many foreign fighters and advisers have been killed since February when the rebels resumed an offensive to capture the oil-rich city of Marib.

Even before the Houthi takeover of power in late 2014, the Yemeni government

accused the Iranian regime of sending arms shipments, funds and military experts to shore up the Houthis.

In November last year, the Yemeni army announced that two Hezbollah military experts were killed after Arab coalition warplanes targeted a training camp outside Houthi-held Sanaa.

The Houthis, who have long denied receiving military support from Iran, recently admitted they received some military know-how from Iranian military experts.

“We benefited from Iranian experiences in the military field. We do not deny that. We thank Iran for that support,” Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdul-Salam told Iran’s Al-Alam television early this month.

Yemeni military analysts and commanders who are battling the Houthis on the ground said that Iran has supplied the Yemeni militia with advanced weapons, drones, ballistic missiles and even light weapons and ammunition.

Col Abdul Basit Al-Baher, a Yemeni army spokesman in the southern city of Taiz, told Arab News that Iran appointed a Revolutionary Guard official as its envoy in the Houthi-controlled areas, provided them with smart weapons, communication technology, reconnaissance and espionage systems, funds and even sought to spread its ideologies in Yemen.

“Iran supplied the Houthis with experts and all weapons from rifles to ballistic missiles and drones,” Al-Baher said.



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Coalition airstrikes kill Hezbollah military experts in YemenArab coalition reiterates support for Yemeni government as battle for Marib continues

[Ever Given, the ship that blocked Suez in March, crosses the canal again](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-08-21 03:06

ISMAILIA, Egypt: The giant container ship Ever Given, which blocked the Suez Canal for six days in March, crossed the waterway on Friday for the first time since it left Egypt after the incident.

The ship, en route from the UK to China, crossed the canal among a convoy of 26 vessels sailing from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, the Suez Canal Authority said in a statement.

Another 36 ships crossed the waterway from the south.

A group of SCA senior pilots and two tugboats escorted the Ever Given throughout its journey through the canal, the authority said in a statement. Live ship tracking showed the vessel successfully negotiating the early stages of the canal on its way toward the Red Sea.

The vessel, one of the world's largest container ships, became jammed across the canal in high winds on March 23.

The operation to free the ship from the canal caused a backlog that delayed the journeys of hundreds of ships, forcing some to take a much longer route around the southern tip of Africa.

Once it was dislodged, the 400-meter vessel left Egypt on July 7, 106 days after becoming wedged across a southern section of the waterway.

Egypt released the Ever Given after protracted negotiations and an undisclosed settlement reached between the SCA and the ship's owners and insurers. It arrived in the Dutch port of Rotterdam on July 29 before heading to Felixstowe, England.

Roughly 15 percent of world shipping traffic transits the Suez Canal, the shortest shipping route between Europe and Asia.

Friday's voyage through the canal was the Ever Given's 22nd in the waterway. Shipping trafficking websites Marinetraffic.com and Vesselfinder.com showed the ship in the Red Sea after crossing the canal.



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[Ever Given](#)

[suez canal](#)

Egypt's El-Sisi extends services of financial regulator, Suez canal headsDeal signed to expand Russian presence in Suez Canal Economic Zone

[Lebanon complains to UN over Israeli airspace violations](#)

Sat, 2021-08-21 02:00

BEIRUT: Lebanon has filed an urgent complaint with the UN Security Council over Israel's violations of its airspace. It said the flyovers "violated Lebanese sovereignty, endangered the safety of civil aviation and directly threatened the lives of civilian passengers, both Lebanese and foreigners."

The acting minister of foreign affairs in the caretaker government, Zeina Akar, said that the hostile planes launched missiles from Lebanese airspace in a flagrant violation and targeted sites in Syria from a low altitude. Akar sent a complaint through Lebanon's representative to the UN, ambassador Amal Mudallali, calling on the UN to stop Israel using Lebanese airspace to carry out its attacks against Syrian territory.

Stefano Del Col, head of mission and force commander of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), said: "Overflights of Lebanese territory

by Israeli fighter aircraft are violations of UN Res. 1701 and of Lebanon's sovereignty. I again call on the IDF to desist from such actions, which undermine UNIFIL efforts to contain tensions and build confidence among the local population."

Speaking to Lebanon's National News Agency, Del Col called on all parties to refrain from any action or response that would further escalate the situation.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun has asked UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Joanna Wronecka "to take swift action to put an end to such Israeli violations and ensure that they are not repeated."

On Thursday night, the Lebanese Army Command recorded six Israeli air violations over Beirut and its suburbs as well as other areas.

The Israeli warplanes flew at low altitude over Beirut and its southern suburbs on their way to bombard Syrian territory, caused panic among the population, especially as it happened a few hours after Secretary-General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah warned the US and Israel against attacking an Iranian ship loaded with diesel heading to Lebanon, saying that once it set sail, the ship would be considered to be part of Lebanese territory.

SPEEDREAD

- **The Lebanese population was alarmed by the noise caused by the launch of the missiles, thinking that Israel was attacking Hezbollah posts.**
- **The Israeli violation of Lebanese airspace forced two commercial planes bound for Beirut airport to change their course.**

The Lebanese population was alarmed by the noise caused by the launch of the missiles, thinking that Israel was attacking Hezbollah posts.

The Israeli violation of Lebanese airspace forced two commercial planes bound for Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport to change their course. The director-general of civil aviation, Fadi Al-Hassan, said: "The aviation movement at Beirut airport did not stop, but the control towers in Syria and Cyprus requested two planes coming to Beirut airport from Abu Dhabi and Turkey to change their course due to the bombing, but both planes later landed normally in Beirut."

No official Lebanese position has been expressed yet about Hezbollah bringing an Iranian ship into Lebanese territorial waters to secure diesel for gas stations, hospitals and owners of private generators.

Paul Morcos, head of the human rights organization Justicia, said: "Importing fuel from Iran without obtaining a special exemption from the US Treasury may put Lebanon at risk of US sanctions. This would directly affect the movement of remittances, credits and shipping to and from Lebanon. International financial institutions and international correspondent banks could refrain from cooperating with Lebanon so as not to violate these sanctions."

"The US sanctions on Iran prevent any dealings with this country that would contribute to achieving revenues, especially in the oil industry and the trade of Iranian goods. US sanctions are imposed on individuals and entities alike," he said.

In addition to the severe diesel shortage, many gas stations in Lebanese regions stopped selling gasoline on Friday, as the fuel-importing companies are running out of stock and the Central Bank is yet to approve new credits for importers.

A 20-liter container of gasoline sells for 500,000 Lebanese pounds on the black market, while its official price is 45,000 Lebanese pounds.

Meanwhile, parliament held a plenary session on Friday to discuss a letter sent by Aoun to take action to confront the Central Bank's decision to lift fuel subsidies. Heated discussions took place between Aoun's team, who oppose lifting subsidies, and MPs who support lifting subsidies and liberalizing the market, "because any law using the mandatory reserve is a violation of the constitution and subject to appeal since it affects private property enshrined in the constitution."

The session ended with a unanimous recommendation "to form a new government, speed up the distribution of ration cards and free the market from monopoly."

"No one can vote on a law to steal people's money, that is, people's deposits in the Central Bank," said Future bloc MP Hadi Hobeish.



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Hariri warns of sanctions risk as Hezbollah orders Iranian oil for Lebanon
Merkel to visit Israel as her tenure nears end