

# UN experts demand 'credible' probe into murder of Hezbollah critic

Mon, 2021-03-22 23:26

LONDON: UN human rights experts have called on Lebanon's government to "ensure a credible and effective investigation" into the assassination of prominent intellectual and Hezbollah critic Luqman Slim.

"More than a month after Mr. Slim's murder, the investigatory steps taken at national level have led to no meaningful result, raising concerns as to the effectiveness of the current investigation," said the three special rapporteurs from the UN's Human Rights Council.

"The government should urgently implement measures to guarantee the independence and the impartiality of the investigation, and ensure that those responsible are identified and held accountable."

Slim was an outspoken critic of Iran-backed Hezbollah, and many have speculated that the group was behind his murder.

Slim, 58, was shot six times, three times in the head, in his car on Feb. 4. He was found in an area of southern Lebanon said to be under Hezbollah's control.

Prior to his death, he said should he be killed, "everybody would know who would be behind it."

The experts, who specialize in extrajudicial killings, judicial independence and free expression, said: "The killing of Mr. Slim appears to be linked to his civic engagement and to be emblematic of the regression of Lebanon civic space, in the context of a reported surge of arrests, intimidations, threats and violence against human rights defenders, journalists and activists."

They added: "We are deeply concerned that the murder of Mr. Slim in the event of a lack of accountability may have a profound chilling effect on freedom of expression in Lebanon."

The UN said Slim was reportedly probing how and why the huge supply of ammonium nitrate that exploded in Beirut's port last year, killing over 200 people and injuring thousands, was in the country.

"Any alleged relation between the explosion and Mr. Slim's assassination should be fully investigated," the experts said.

At the time, US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea condemned the killing, saying: "We are saddened to have lost a great person through such an unacceptable barbaric act that we will never forget."

She emphasized "the need to know who committed this heinous crime," and vowed to "continue supporting the institutions Slim had established."



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Protests follow murder of Lebanese anti-Hezbollah activist Luqman Slim

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## [Lebanon stalemate continues after 18th Aoun-Hariri meeting collapses](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-03-22 22:16

BEIRUT: A critical meeting on Monday between Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri on the country's uncertain future failed to reach an agreement.

The 18th meeting between the two men, held at the Presidential Palace, was

met before and after with pessimism by much of the Lebanese public.

Hariri insists on forming a government of 18 independent specialists acting as ministers, without the capacity for a blocking third by any party, while Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) propose a government of 20 ministers, with the right to name 6 ministers in addition to an Armenian minister.

After Monday's meeting, which lasted just 35 minutes, Hariri said that Aoun sent him on Sunday "a complete ministerial structure in which the portfolios were distributed among the sects and parties, along with a letter telling me that it is advisable to fill it out.

"The list includes a blocking third of his political team, whether the government consists of 18, 20 or 22 ministers.

"He asked me to suggest names for the portfolios according to the sectarian and party distribution that he had prepared."

Hariri said that he told Aoun during the meeting that "this is unacceptable because it is not the prime minister-designate's job to fill out lists prepared by anyone, and it is not the job of the president to form a government.

"Our constitution clearly says that the prime minister-designate forms the government and puts the names, and discusses his formation with the president of the republic.

As a result of this, Hariri said: "Accordingly, I respectfully informed him that I consider his letter as if it had not been sent. I returned it to him and informed him that I would keep a copy of it for history."

Hariri said he previously suggested a government formation to Aoun more than 100 days ago, and told him: "I am ready for any proposals and amendments to names and portfolios. Even with his insistence on the Interior Ministry, I suggested a solution for him. Unfortunately, his answer was clear: The blocking third."

Hariri added: "I have one goal, which is to put an end to the collapse and the suffering of the Lebanese. I asked the president to listen to the pain of the Lebanese and give the country its only and last chance for a government of specialists to implement reforms and stop the collapse without disruption or narrow partisan considerations."

Hariri denied that he had previously provided Aoun with broad lines for his government. He distributed to the media the list of "specialized ministers" that he presented to Aoun on Dec. 9, requesting that "public opinion be the judge."

The prime minister-designate did not respond to questions by the press, and no date has been set for a new meeting between the two parties.

Hariri's suggested list included well-known academics and experts, including

three women.

The Future Movement media coordinator, Abd Al-Salam Moussa, told Arab News: "Hariri thwarted the administration's coup against the republic."

After Hariri finished a speech at the Presidential Palace after the meeting, large swathes of protesters took to the streets of Beirut to express their anger, while electronic platforms that control the black market began to raise the dollar exchange rate again.

Earlier in the day, the exchange rate stood at 11,300 Lebanese pounds, but after Hariri's statement, it spiked to 13,000 Lebanese pounds.

The 17th meeting between Aoun and Hariri last Thursday also complicated Monday's meeting, making it difficult to reach a solution to Lebanon's political crisis.

Maronite Patriarch Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, on the eve of Aoun and Hariri's meeting, appealed to the two parties to "stop onerous conditions."

He said: "If some want to burden the next government with the region's conflicts and the race to the presidency, regime change and control of power, then that will lead to chaos, which will not show mercy to anyone, starting with its creators."

Caution and public anxiety preceded the Aoun-Hariri meeting and increased after it.

Despite the reopening of restaurants and cafes on Monday, with strict health measures in place – two months after total lockdown began – the public chose to stay home.



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Aoun and Hariri exchange accusations as Lebanon government hopes fade  
France's Le Drian urges EU to help steady Lebanon

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## [Yemenis embrace Saudi peace initiative and urge Houthis to accept](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2021-03-22 22:23

AL-MUKALLA: The Yemeni government, local officials and displaced people on Monday welcomed the Saudi initiative to halt the war in Yemen, and called on the Houthis to accept it and end more than six years of conflict.

Yemen's Foreign Ministry said the Saudi plan is "compatible with" the Yemeni government's repeated calls for peace and an end to the suffering of the Yemeni people. It blamed the Iran-backed Houthis for the failure of previous peace plans.

"The Yemeni government is fully aware that ending the suffering of Yemenis will only be done by ending the coup and the war that was sparked by the Houthi militia," the ministry said. "(The government) is committed to all peace efforts to end the coup, restore the state and reject Iran's destructive project in Yemen."

The war in Yemen began in late 2014 when the Houthis stormed the capital, Sanaa. They placed President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi under house arrest and overthrew his government. The conflict has claimed more than 100,000 lives, destroyed state institutions and, according to the UN, created the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The effects of the war and Houthi oppression forced tens of thousands of Yemenis in Houthi-controlled regions to flee their homes. They are now living in displacement camps in areas under government control.

Abu Omer and his large family fled the fighting in the northern province of Al-Jouf early last year. They are now living in a camp in the central city of Marib. He said he hopes the Saudi initiative will end the war, and urged the warring factions to cease hostilities so that his family can go home.

"This is good news and all people must accept it," he told Arab News. "I hope to return to my home when the Houthis leave our area."

Health officials in Yemen have also called for a halt to the fighting across the country so that they can work to contain a new wave of COVID-19 infections that has started to claim dozens of lives in the past few days.

Ishraq Al-Subaee, a spokeswoman for the Aden-based National Coronavirus Committee, called on the warring factions to accept the Saudi peace initiative to help relieve the pressure on health services in Yemen.

"We (support) the peace initiative and calls for stopping the war in Yemen," she told Arab News. "We want to confront the second wave of coronavirus that has spread quickly in the country."

She added that the war has devastated the Yemeni economy and health service, and is responsible for creating a malnutrition crisis.

Analysts said that the Saudi initiative leaves no room for maneuver for the Houthis, who have long refused to accept any peace deal that does not include the reopening of Sanaa airport and Hodeidah seaport, among other things. Saleh Al-Baydani, a Yemeni political analyst, told Arab News that there is no excuse for rejecting the deal because it meets all of these requirements.

"The initiative shows the international community who is the party that obstructs peace efforts in Yemen," Al-Baydani said. "The international community should exert real pressure on this militia that has held millions

of Yemenis hostage.”

The Houthis have rejected or breached previous peace agreements and initiatives, said Yasser Al-Yafae, a Yemeni political analyst in the southern city of Aden. Therefore they might try to disrupt the latest plan by launching drone and missile strikes on targets inside and outside of Yemen if the international community does not intervene, he warned.

“Without real international pressure on them, the Houthis could foil this initiative like what they did with previous peace efforts,” Al-Yafae told Arab News.



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## [Turkey and Russia escalate standoff in Syria](#)

Mon, 2021-03-22 20:04

ANKARA: Turkey has asked for Russia’s help in shielding northwestern Syria following mounting airstrikes in the area, which is home to 4 million people.

The attacks are hitting civilian targets like hospitals as well as fuel facilities, which are vital for the infrastructure that Turkey wants to establish.

A missile targeted the town of Qah in northern Idlib as well as a truck and trailer park near Sarmada, wounding several civilians.

Syrian artillery also killed at least seven civilians and injured medical staff in an attack on a hospital in the rebel-controlled town of Al-Atareb. On Sunday, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that strikes carried out by Russian jets hit a fuel depot in Bab al-Hawa, near the Turkish border.

The Turkish Defense Ministry sent a statement to Russia after the Qah airstrike, asking it to stop the attacks. There was no immediate comment from the Kremlin.

Its request comes as Russia increases its pressure on Syrian Kurds to leave the strategically located town of Ain Issa while also trying to push Turkey back from gaining more space.

Analysts said that Russia's latest moves in Idlib aimed to destabilize the region and undermine commercial activities.

But President Bashar Assad's regime and Russia say they are only targeting militant Islamists.

"Turkey has only a few areas in Syria where it can really push the Russians, as needed," Nicholas Heras, a senior analyst at the Newlines Institute in Washington, told Arab News.

"Although the Syrian Kurds are an irritant to Russia's policy to reestablish the Assad regime's control over all of Syria, the Kurds are also a useful chip for Russia in bargaining with Turkey and to try to convince the Kurds to pull away from the Americans."

Ain Issa, which is held by Kurdish forces, has become a flashpoint between Turkey and Russia.

Russia expressed its displeasure a few days ago at Turkish movements around Ain Issa, viewing them as a violation of the Sochi agreement signed in Oct. 2019.

Kurdish forces withdrew 32 km back from the Turkish border under the deal, and Ain Issa is 37 km away from the frontier.

The Turks and Russians are conducting joint patrols in the area, and Russia already has a coordination center in Ain Issa.

Turkey is attacking the mainly Kurdish militia the People's Protection Units (YPG) in northwestern Syria and backs the Syrian National Army against them. It sees the YPG as a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which is outlawed in Turkey and is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey,

the US and EU.

Heras said that Russia's guardianship of YPG-controlled areas in Aleppo was useful for Russia and that the Turks, who would like to take over those areas, were well aware of this.

"Turkish movements in these areas are messaging to the Russians that the Turks have the means to weaken Russia's hand in the game for control over northern Syria."

The Syrian Kurds have been under Russian pressure for some time to cede control of Ain Issa to Damascus.

Russia is trying to avoid a military operation by Turkey in the region in order to restrict its influence, so is pressuring the YPG to withdraw or decrease its military presence.

Ain Issa has become the focal point of Turkish and Syrian National Army attacks for a few months.

Aydin Sezer, an expert on Turkey-Russia relations, expected a growing standoff by Russia that would remind Turkey about its unmet commitments on different fronts.

In January, Russia's sovereign wealth fund signed a deal with Turkey on the co-production of its Sputnik V vaccine.

But there has been no progress so far, nor any statement from the Turkish side on how this cooperation will evolve.

Sezer also said that Russia had expressed its discomfort about Turkey's supportive messages to Crimea and its non-fulfillment of commitments for joint energy projects.

"Russian moves in Syria and its unconditional support to Damascus should be seen from a wider perspective," he told Arab News. "Apart from the vaccine issue, Russia is also uneasy with Turkey's inaction in Idlib to eliminate all terrorist groups in the region in line with the Astana, Sochi and Moscow deals on Idlib."

Russia was no longer convinced by Turkey's longtime narrative about hitting Syrian Kurds in the region as it had the upper hand in military, diplomatic and political terms, he added.

"Therefore, the Kremlin did not even release any statement after Turkey's Sunday announcement for helping to stop the attacks in Syria. Tensions run high and it is a consciously escalated standoff that might undermine the Turkey-Russia partnership in the region in the near term."



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Russian missile attacks in Syria defy cease-fire with Turkey  
First Turkish air strikes on Kurdish zone in Syria in 17 months: monitor

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## [President Abbas rebuffs Israeli intelligence chief](#)

Author:

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AMMAN: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas used an Arab proverb to rebuff attempts by Israelis to intervene in the Palestinian elections.

Jibril Rajoub, the secretary of the Fatah movement, said the head of Shabak (internal Israeli elections), Nadav Argaman, tried to stop their efforts to

create a joint list with Hamas.

"He visited the Palestinian presidential compound and made threats to all of us," Rajoub said on Palestine TV. The Israeli official who said he was carrying a message from the Israeli prime minister was accompanied by an American official. Palestinian sources say that they believe the US official is part of a US intelligence service.

Abbas reportedly answered the Israeli official, who is fluent in Arabic, using an Arabic proverb: "Drink your coffee and may God be with you." It is a polite way of rejecting the request.

Lina Haddad, an expert on Arab proverbs, said that people use proverbs as an indirect way of avoiding saying something harsh.

"He wanted to send a message that I am being kind to you by serving you coffee as a guest of mine but do not abuse my hospitality," Haddad told Arab News.

Rajoub fiercely criticized Argaman's boss, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, saying he "is worse than Mussolini."

The idea of a joint Fatah-Hamas list was first mentioned in the Istanbul talks between Rajoub and the deputy head of Hamas, Saleh Aruri, in 2020.

Hamas, which had acceded not to contest the presidential elections, then agreed to allow for legislative polls to take place two months before presidential elections.

Former Fatah central committee member Naser Al-Qudwa issued a strongly worded statement opposing the idea regarding the joint list, calling it "undemocratic" and that it "smells of personal gains on the account of the people."

Al-Qudwa has since created the Palestinian Democratic Assembly and is planning to run on a non-Fatah list of independent Palestinians. Abbas has ordered that Al-Qudwa be removed from the Fatah movement and has fired him as the head of the Yasser Arafat Foundation.

Mohammad Daraghmeh, a veteran Palestinian journalist, told Arab News that the joint list faces many problems, especially with Hamas' demand to have the same number of seats as Fatah. Daraghmeh said the Israeli security chief also threatened to stop the elections and warned against the efforts by Palestinians to try Israelis for war crimes.

Fadi Elasalameen, senior fellow with the American Security Project, told Arab News that he was not surprised that Israel does not want Hamas in the West Bank. "But, I find it hard to believe that Abbas, who depends entirely on Israeli security to stay in power in the West Bank, would speak in such a way to the Israeli head of Shabak. It is election season and it does not hurt Abbas to flex his political muscle."

Three lists, including one by the Democratic Front for Palestine, have

officially registered to run. The window of nominations closes on March 31.

Salam Fayyad, Al-Qudwa, and others have yet to propose their list for the elections. Efforts are also being made to unify left-wing Palestinian factions into a single list.



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Does Abbas intend to run for president after all? Abbas decrees a minimum of seven seats for Christian Palestinians