

Negative response to Larijani's offer of economic assistance to Lebanon

Tue, 2020-02-18 00:30

BEIRUT: Iran's Speaker Ali Larijani's visit to Lebanon was not welcomed by political leaders opposing Hezbollah, in what was the first official foreign visit by a senior politician to Beirut since the formation of a new government led by Prime Minister Hassan Diab. Apart from Diab, Larijani met with Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Speaker Nabih Berri.

"He (Larijani) conveyed to Aoun a letter from the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani regarding Iranian-Lebanese ties, and invited him to visit Tehran," said Aoun's media office.

"Lebanon is an influential country in the region. The relations between our two countries have always been based on friendship and goodwill. Iran is continually seeking to see the brotherly Lebanon as a free, sovereign and independent country," said Larijani at Rafic Hariri International Airport. Reacting to his visit, former Minister Ashraf Rifi said: "Keep your hands away from Lebanon for it to stay free, sovereign and independent. The project of Iranian hegemony and trusteeship will fall sooner or later because it opposes the people's freedom and dream of a better future.

"Liberating Lebanon from your hegemony is the gateway to salvation. Iran has only offered Lebanon destruction and blood. Do not believe the delusion of dominating over Lebanon through your tool's weapons," he added.

Member of Parliament Nadim Gemayel, who is a member of the Kataeb Party, said: "Welcome to your mini-state and thank you for your wishes. Start by keeping your hands and evil away from Lebanon. Tell that to Hassan Nasrallah, the chief of Wilayat Al-Faqih in our country.

"Our situation today is a direct result of Hezbollah's corruption, illegal weapons and indiscriminate wars. They led investors and the international community to lose confidence in the country and brought economic pressures and sanctions," he added.

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Ashraf Rifi, Former Lebanese minister

Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah, had previously given a speech calling for a boycott of US goods in Lebanon. In it, he had stated his confidence that Iran would make up any shortfalls, and was ready to provide Lebanon's armed forces with necessary arms and equipment.

The offer was echoed by the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif during an official visit to Beirut.

"My country is ready to provide assistance and cooperate with the Lebanese government in all fields. We are waiting for this desire to be shared by the

Lebanese side,” he said.

The Iranian offer sparked a debate in Lebanon, as acceptance would be considered a challenge to US sanctions on Iran and a deviation from Lebanon’s disassociation policy.

Nasrallah reiterated the offer and suggested resorting to China to resolve the country’s chronic crises in a speech last November.

Larijani’s visit on Sunday coincided with another move by Hezbollah, to unveil a monument dedicated to Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani, killed in a US drone strike in January, on the Southern Lebanese border with Israel.

Former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora reacted by saying: “The unveiling of the monument is an unhelpful move and an unwise action.”



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[A year on, challenges remain for Algerian protest movement](#)

Tue, 2020-02-18 00:21

ALGIERS: On Feb. 22, 2019, sudden and unprecedented protests swept Algeria. A

year on, despite bringing down a president, the “Hirak” protest movement faces mounting challenges.

Massive anti-government protests held every Friday quickly gathered momentum: Six weeks in, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned after 20 years in power.

But Algeria’s military was quick to reassert control and by the time presidential elections were held in December, a former Bouteflika ally succeeded him in a vote deeply opposed by protesters and shunned by most voters.

“With the presidential election, we passed into act two, with all the specter of improbability, uncertainty and instability” that entails, Karima Direche, an historian of contemporary North Africa, told AFP.

“It matches what Algerians have been saying for a year: ‘Everything is moving and nothing is changing.’” While a year of weekly protests has not yet brought down “the system” that they challenged, the Hirak movement has profoundly changed Algeria’s political landscape.

Bouteflika’s resignation and the imprisonment of corrupt businessmen and politicians are “tangible results, even if the main demand of regime change and systemic reform is far from having been achieved,” said Dalia Ghanem, a researcher with the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut.

But Hirak’s biggest success, she said, was “the increased awareness of Algerians and their desire to reconnect with politics ... without fear of another civil war.”

A brutal war between the Algerian army and Islamist rebels killed some 200,000 people in the 1990s.

The trauma of the conflict was exploited under Bouteflika to discourage dissent, and until February 22 had rendered large protests on the streets unimaginable.

Ahead of the first protests, Algeria’s political system had remained focused on presidential polls that were widely expected to return Bouteflika to power – despite the 82-year-old being largely incapacitated since a stroke in 2013. Cut off from the public, the regime sensed growing anger but underestimated it. Young Algerians – disproportionately affected by massive unemployment in a country where the majority is under 30 – were fed up with being represented by a wheelchair-bound octogenarian whose rare public appearances elicited mockery online.

Simmering anger peaked when, during a meeting of the president’s party, a portrait of Bouteflika was addressed by party apparatchiks in the absence of the ailing leader.

Calls to protest on Feb. 22 began multiplying across social media.

Few expected the movement to take hold though, especially in Algiers, where since 2001 public rallies had been banned.

But then on the first Friday, overwhelmed police stood aside as tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators poured out onto the streets.

In a country without a real opposition party or union, for the first time “the street appeared as a protest force,” said Karima Direche, an historian at the French National Center for Scientific Research.

According to Jean-Pierre Filiu, professor of Middle East studies at Sciences Po University in Paris, the Hirak has for the past year taken center stage in “both the nation’s history and public space.”

And by keeping the protests peaceful, “the movement has changed the rules of

the game in Algerian politics, which was previously marked by violence and a lack of transparency.”

The Hirak has also shown the profound transformation of Algerian society: Led by an educated and hyperconnected youth, and in particular women, who are now determined to be heard.

Algeria’s new president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, aged 74, “will have to deal with that. He won’t be able to rule like those before him,” said Direche.

A year on, the protests are smaller than in spring 2019, but the movement remains strong.

The Hirak wants to influence the changes promised by the new president but is struggling to structure itself and agree on a future strategy.

“As the movement celebrates its first anniversary, I want to ask ‘What’s next?,’” said Ghanem. “What do you want? What are you demanding and how will you obtain concrete results?”

Several civil society groups born of the Hirak movement are to hold a conference in Algiers on Sunday marking the anniversary in a bid to unify their ranks as a political force.

Participants from across Algeria and abroad will examine a “Feb. 22 Proclamation” summing up the demands and slogans of the protest movement, organizers said.



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UN envoy condemns use of birdshot against Iraqi protesters

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Mon, 2020-02-17 19:10

BAGHDAD: The top United Nations envoy to Iraq condemned on Monday the use of hunting rifles loaded with birdshot against peaceful protesters in Baghdad and urged the government to ensure those demonstrating are not harmed. The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq said it had received credible allegations of protesters being targeted with hunting rifles, stones and firebombs on the nights of Feb. 14-16, leading to at least 50 injuries. At least 150 people were injured in the Shiite Muslim holy city of Kerbala in January alone due to similar tactics, UNAMI said in a statement. "The continued pattern of the use of excessive force, with ambiguously identified armed groups and unclear loyalties, is a grave security concern that must be tackled urgently and decisively. Peaceful protesters should be protected at all times," said Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq. There was no immediate comment from Iraqi authorities. Iraq is facing an extraordinary domestic crisis as nearly 500 people have been killed since October in protests demanding the ouster of what demonstrators see as a corrupt ruling elite and an end to foreign interference mainly by Iran and the United States. At least nine people were wounded on Monday in Baghdad during renewed clashes between protesters and security forces, police sources said. Two were wounded because of birdshot and the rest suffered teargas-related injuries. Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi said on Saturday a new government would be formed in the coming week. Allawi appealed to Iraqis for their support hours after his appointment by President Barham Salih earlier this month, but protesters have already rejected him as a stooge of the political elite.



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[Egypt pulls plug on popular street music](#)

Tue, 2020-02-18 00:46

CAIRO: The union of Egyptian musicians has banned performances by singers of popular street music after the lyrics of a chart-topping song were deemed too racy for the conservative country.

The ban announced on Sunday targets singers of mahraganat (Arabic for festivals) which has its roots in impoverished Cairo suburbs and spread after Egypt's 2011 uprising that ousted a longtime autocratic president.

Mahraganat, often known as "electro-shaabi" (or popular electro), is a genre that relies heavily on computer-generated and synthesized beats.

It has gone mainstream in Egypt – a cultural powerhouse in the Arab world –

with its outlandishly named stars stepping over moral boundaries and monetizing their social media success.

But critics have roundly condemned mahraganat as symptomatic of a low-brow trend devoid of the sentimental qualities of romantic pop music that dominated Egypt's booming industry in previous decades.

Earlier this month the song "Bint Al-Giran" (The girl next door) reached over 100 million views on YouTube and was the second most played hit on SoundCloud, the do-it-yourself streaming platform.

On Valentine's Day, crooner Hassan Shakoosh performed his hit at a packed Cairo stadium to tens of thousands of fans.

But the song's lyrics – "I drink alcohol and smoke hashish" – sparked the ire of the union, which reflects the views of authorities and takes orders from the Culture Ministry in the conservative Muslim-majority country.

The head of the musicians union, Hany Shaker, was quick to react and on Sunday banned mahraganat singers from performing at clubs, cafes, hotels and concerts.

HIGHLIGHT

The street music has gone mainstream in Egypt – a cultural powerhouse in the Arab world – with its outlandishly named stars stepping over moral boundaries and monetizing their social media success.

"This kind of music which is loaded with sexual innuendo and offensive language is completely unacceptable. That's why we have pulled the plug on it once and for all," Shaker said.

A statement by the union said "legal proceedings" would be lodged against establishments that host the performers.

"This is a terrible social phenomenon that Egyptian families are complaining about," union spokesman Tarek Mortada told AFP on Monday.

The manager of Shakoosh apologized.

"We are very sorry for our mistake and respect the union's decision," manager Camba told AFP on Monday.

He said the lyrics which offended public sensibilities were played at the stadium because of a technical glitch.

"We have lost 17 gigs overnight – besides the emotional stress on Shakoosh and the team with everyone jumping in and commenting about our music," he added.



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[Turkey-Russia spat 'not to affect missile agreement'](#)

Mon, 2020-02-17 03:19

ANKARA: The dispute between Moscow and Ankara over Syria's rebel-held Idlib province will not affect the purchase of Russia's S-400 missile system, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Saturday after meeting his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

"They're two different issues," Cavusoglu added. "We can't change our principal stance, our policies, because of one disagreement with this country or that country. We shouldn't let the Syrian problem undermine our cooperation and also our relations."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has demanded that the Syrian regime withdraw its Russian-backed forces from territory captured in its ongoing offensive in Idlib by the end of the month or face military retaliation. The ultimatum follows the killing of 13 Turkish soldiers by regime shelling in

one week.

Aaron Stein, director of the Middle East program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, tweeted: "Idlib isn't magic, and the S-400 issue won't magically go away. It is going to end badly."

In December 2017, Turkey and Russia signed a \$2.5 billion deal, vehemently opposed by the US, for the delivery of four S-400 batteries.

The transfer of all components of the S-400 system was completed last year. Turkey received the first batch of S-400s last year. The delivery date of the second batch is yet to be announced.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director of the German Marshall Fund of the US, said Washington sees the current tension between Ankara and Moscow as an opportunity to fix its relationship with Turkey.

FASTFACT

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"Ankara appears open to the approach. However ... Turkey has already taken delivery of (the S-400 system) from Russia," he told Arab News.

"Turkey's operationalization of the S-400s could be sanctioned by the US Congress despite the US administration's efforts to improve relations. Therefore, if the US and Turkey are serious about fixing their relationship, they need to find some sort of solution to the S-400 crisis."

Sinan Ulgen, a former Turkish diplomat who chairs the Istanbul-based Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, told Arab News: "If we do witness escalation in the coming days, with Turkey entering into direct military conflict with Syria, backed by Russia, it would be difficult to imagine a scenario where Turkey purchases yet another strategic weapons system from Russia, a second battery for the S-400, all the more so since it seems that Turkey is seeking more political support from its partners in the West, particularly from the US."

Ulgen said if Ankara wants to improve its ties with the West, it will have to review its purchases of strategic weapons systems from Russia.



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