

Hariri pours cold water on Lebanon govt hopes

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:40

BEIRUT: Hopes that Lebanon would have a new government before the end of the year have been dashed with Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri warning of “clear complications hindering the birth of the new leadership.”

Speaking on Wednesday after his 14th meeting with President Michel Aoun, Hariri said that despite attempts to halt Lebanon’s collapse, “the existing political problems are clear.”

He added: “We must be humble and think about the country’s interests. A government must be formed after the new year.”

The caretaker prime minister addressed the Lebanese people, saying: “Do not let anyone tell you that we cannot stop the current collapse, but President Aoun and I need a government of specialists and experts who know what they are doing, without being politicized.”

He added: “We want people who tell us ‘no’ when we are wrong. We want people who can actually benefit the country, so that we can carry out the reforms we want.”

Hariri said that trust between Lebanon’s political parties needed to be rebuilt, but warned “there is no time left – the country is rapidly collapsing.”

After a previous meeting with Aoun, Hariri was hopeful of forming a government before Christmas, saying “there is positivity and great openness.”

However, leaks in the lead-up to Wednesday’s meeting showed there was still a dispute over the interior, justice and energy ministries, which the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) insists on controlling as part of a political deal to break the government deadlock.

International pressure, especially from France, to form a government committed to reform has failed to end the stalemate.

Sources close to Hariri told Arab News that Aoun was “responsive” to the prime minister’s suggestions, “but there are those who interfered and overturned this response.”

Future bloc deputy Mohammed Al-Hajjar said: “It is Gebran Bassil (FPM president). He does not want to see Hariri heading a government of specialists.”

Former prime ministers met with Hariri before his Republican Palace visit and agreed to push on with the French initiative to form a government without

links to the parties in power.

The political impasse raises fears over Lebanon's growing poverty levels, with the number of poor likely to exceed half the population by 2021.

Lebanese people fear the start of the new year in light of talks about harsh measures needed to support basic materials subsidized by the state, including fuel, flour and medicine.

FPM deputy Alain Aoun said: "There has been no decision yet regarding the government. There are many unresolved issues. No team will waiver in favor of the other."

Independent MP Jihad Al-Samad said: "There are 53 laws relating to the reform process, workflow regulations, and performance of ministries and official departments. These are locked in officials' drawers and are not being applied. How can reform take place without applying the existing laws and provisions?"

Ghazi Wazni, the caretaker finance minister, said on Wednesday that banking secrecy will be lifted for a year and consultants Alvarez & Marsal asked to resume its financial audit of the central bank, ministries and public institutions.

The firm withdrew from the investigation on Nov. 20, saying it "did not obtain sufficient information to initiate the audit."

At the time the central bank invoked secrecy laws on cash, credit and banking to avoid providing the required information.



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[Erdogan's oil ship in eastern Med until June](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:13

ANKARA: Recep Tayyip Erdogan has authorized controversial oil exploration by a survey vessel in the eastern Mediterranean for a further six months, until June next year.

The Turkish president has also obtained parliamentary approval for troop deployment in Libya for another 18 months, after his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its allies outvoted the opposition.

The survey vessel Oruc Reis will now continue searching for oil and gas in territorial waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus, in a move that will infuriate the EU.

Last month, EU leaders committed to limited sanctions on Turkish individuals but suspended more serious steps until March, while Greece has demanded an arms embargo on Turkey.

In Libya, after a pact on military cooperation between Ankara and Tripoli in 2019, Turkey sent its troops there on a year-long mandate in January. Turkey recently appointed Kenan Yilmaz, a bureaucrat who was involved in the Libyan talks from the outset, as the new ambassador to Tripoli.

"Turkey extended its deployment in Libya because the Turkish government knows there is rapidly increasing cooperation between Greece and regional allies such as Egypt and Israel, as well as the UAE and France," said Evangelos D. Kokkinos, a geopolitical expert in Athens.

He told Arab News that Erdogan was trying to raise tensions abroad to maintain his influence inside Turkey. However, a full-scale war would come at a political cost to Erdogan, meaning a military standoff between Greece and Turkey was likely.

"Greece will keep on pressuring the EU for an arms embargo and sanctions against Turkey, and not just against Turkish individuals. A large force of the Greek Navy has been deployed across Greek borders and will defend Greek sovereignty, no matter the cost," he said.

Greek defense agreements with the UAE and Egypt would deter military escalation in the region, he said.

Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, told Arab News that Ankara's recent decisions about extension of deployment terms were unsurprising.

“Turkey intends to stay in Libya for the long term,” he said. “The goal of Ankara is to create facts on the ground in Libya, Syria, Somalia, Qatar, and other states to justify its involvement and keep up pressure on countries it views as enemies, such as Egypt.”

Frantzman said such a move gave Ankara leverage over the Mediterranean and the chance to continue to threaten to blackmail countries such as Greece, Egypt, and Israel every time it needed a distraction or some new chest-beating populist cause to claim it was challenging other countries.



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[Top US officials discuss ‘range of options’ to protect Americans in Iraq from Iran attacks](#)

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:13

WASHINGTON: Top US national security officials agreed on Wednesday on a proposed range of options to present to President Donald Trump aimed at

detering any attack on US military or diplomatic personnel in Iraq, a senior administration official told Reuters.

The meeting was spurred by an attack on Dec. 20. At least eight rockets landed in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone in an attack targeting the US Embassy, causing some minor damage, the Iraqi military and the embassy said on Sunday.

The official said the so-called principals committee group of officials, including acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security adviser Robert O'Brien, discussed the situation at the White House.

They agreed on a "range of options" that will be presented soon to Trump, the official said. The official would not describe the content of the options or say whether they included military options.

"Each one is designed to be non-escalatory and to deter further attack," the official said.

The Iraqi military blamed the Dec. 20 attack on an "outlaw group."

But US officials blame Iran-backed militia for regular rocket attacks on US facilities in Iraq, including near the embassy in Baghdad. No known Iran-backed groups have claimed responsibility.

The senior administration official said the aim of the White House meeting was "to develop the right set of options that we could present to the president to make sure that we deter the Iranians and Shia militias in Iraq from conducting attacks on our personnel."

An array of militia groups announced in October that they had suspended rocket attacks on US forces on condition that Iraq's government present a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops.

But a rocket strike on the US Embassy on Nov. 18 was a clear sign that Iranian-backed militias had decided to resume attacks on US bases, according to Iraqi security officials.

Washington, which is slowly reducing its 5,000 troops in Iraq, threatened to shut its embassy unless the Iraqi government reins in Iran-aligned militias.



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[Egypt's president sends message of support to Libyan leaders](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 21:51

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has reiterated his rejection of foreign interference in Libya and support for efforts to find a comprehensive solution to the country's security, political, and economic crises.

His comments came in a message, delivered by the head of the Egyptian committee on Libyan affairs, to the leaders of south Libya meeting in Cairo

to discuss ways of unifying the parliament, and forming an executive authority and constitutional path.

On Tuesday, members of a 75-strong delegation from southern Libya began talks with committee representatives just hours after arriving in the Egyptian capital for a three-day visit during which meetings will take place with sovereign bodies in Egypt and El-Sisi.

On the first day of discussions, the Libyan delegation stressed the need to strengthen Egypt's role and contributions toward restoring security, peace, and stability in all cities of Libya, while also preserving the country's unity and helping solve the difficult situation in the southern region.

The trip comes as part of Egypt's efforts to communicate with all Libyan parties, with the aim of converging views, uniting the Libyan ranks, deterring extremist militias and countering their attempts to control the government, and supporting international moves to reach a political settlement to the Libyan crisis.

During its visit, the Libyan delegation will present to the Egyptians its vision for resolving the crisis and overcoming obstacles to unification, especially in relation to the country's legislative body, achieving consensus on a mechanism for choosing the next executive authority, and agreeing appropriate constitutional arrangements to allow elections to take place.



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[NGOs call for reform to Turkey's presidential system](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-22 22:35

ANKARA: Turkey's highly contentious executive presidential system is again under the spotlight following a new report released by the Checks and Balances Network, a prestigious umbrella organization gathering 294 non-governmental organizations.

Turkey's presidential system was launched in July 2018, sparking widespread debate because of the powers it put in the president's hands, diminishing the role of the parliament, leading to the erosion of judiciary oversight and undermining civil society's ability to monitor public projects.

The report asserts that this system has led to a hyper-centralization of the country's decision-making process because the president is not constrained by any supreme body or constitutional breaks.

The Checks and Balances Network has recommended reforms by separating the head of state from the party chair. It also suggested efficient parliamentary auditing over the government and president.

With the new system, presidential decrees – which are generally signed overnight – are excluded from the parliament review, while unanswered parliamentary questions to the vice-president and ministers have become common.

In the 27th term of the parliament, a total of 21,504 parliamentary questions have been submitted, but 11,663 of them have been unanswered. Only 1,700 parliamentary questions were answered in time.

“The principle of the separation of powers has been obstructed in favor of the executive power. The system now permits the president to hold the joint offices of the head of state, head of government and head of the ruling party. This situation has pushed Turkey to a hyper-presidential system,” said the report.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sued opposition

Republican People's Party (CHP) Group Deputy Chairman Ozgur Ozel for emotional damages after he called him a "dictator." Ozel recently resembled Erdogan to Spanish dictator Francesco Franco as Erdogan referred to the main opposition as a "fifth column."

The new report comes soon after the publication of a study about polarization in Turkey conducted by the Istanbul Bilgi University and German Marshall Fund, which found that 90 percent of CHP supporters and 77 percent of supporters from the Peoples' Democratic Party think the executive presidential system is bad for the country's future.

Rights activists have reacted to these reports by emphasizing the negative repercussions of the presidential system over freedoms and rights.

"Before the presidential system came into force, the pledge was to enlarge the area of rights and freedoms and convey reform agendas that enhance capacity of inclusive institutions and democracy which already deteriorated in the state of emergency period," Hayriye Atas, general director of Checks and Balances Network, told Arab News.

However, since 2018, Turkish NGOs have seen a serious backsliding in their operational environment. In 2020, the activities of the civil society – including their meetings – have been curtailed due to pandemic rules.

Due to a new law, NGOs are now obliged to notify the names of their members to the government – which many fear will deter joining civil society organizations over concerns that they could be monitored.

"It can be noticed when we follow detentions and arrests of activists and human rights defenders so far. In addition, there is still a lack of an inclusive legislative framework that regulates civil society. All amendments and legislations relating to civil society pass through omnibus bills swiftly that don't allow for consensus or participation of related actors in the legislation process," Atas said.

The report notes that, while executive power and its control area has enhanced, the efficiency of parliament and the rule of law has decreased dramatically, with executive intervention in civil society area becoming obvious.

"If this process continues, the movement area of civil society is constricted and democracy efforts of the country will regress in the long run," Atas said.

Turkey's opposition parties and NGOs are concerned by a draft bill by the government that could eliminate civil society activities in the country by allowing the Interior Ministry to replace their boards and suspend activities.

According to Atas, the parliament lost nearly all of its leverage over the decision-making process.

"The main phenomenon behind the presidential system is the strict separation

of power among the judiciary, executive and parliament. In this system, the parliament should be especially empowered and efficient to monitor government, the rule-making power mainly belongs to the parliament, but the presidential system is run in favor of executive power through omnibus bills, presidential decrees, weak parliamentary commissions," she said.

Hakan Yavuzyilmaz, a policy analyst, said one of the prevalent features of Turkish politics has been the presence of severe political polarization that becomes a facilitating factor for the democratic backsliding in the country.

"Following the transition to a presidential system, the political and social polarization did not diminish. Under such a prevalent polarization, it is hard to conclude that Turkish citizens are becoming apolitical. Nevertheless, we are also seeing a growing number of undecided voters," he told Arab News.

"Such a voter detachment shows a warning signal for the stability of the party system. Time will tell whether existing political parties can successfully re-mobilize this electorate within the grey zone," he added.



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