

US envoy joins calls for drastic reform in Lebanon

Author:

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BEIRUT: US Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker called on Lebanon's leaders to implement drastic and wide-ranging reforms as he launched a two-day visit to the crisis-stricken country on Wednesday.

Schenker said that he wants to see reforms that "respond to the Lebanese people's desire for transparency, accountability and a government free of corruption."

Diplomatic sources told Arab News that Schenker's program of meetings is "unusual and unexpected."

The US official will meet civilian and business leaders for talks related to US aid after the Beirut port explosion on Aug. 4.

Schenker's arrival follows French President Emmanuel Macron's second visit to Lebanon during which he made any French bailout conditional on widespread reforms.

Macron gave Lebanese officials "15 days to form the government and eight weeks to implement the promises."

In a press release, the French leader said: "If you honor your commitments, we will honor ours. Otherwise, there is no blank check and we will not be able to support Lebanon."

He also said that if the new leadership failed to honor its commitments, "those hindering these efforts will be named."

Macron managed to bring together rival party officials at the Residence des Pins, the French ambassador's residence, for a meeting attended by Saad Hariri (Future Movement), Walid Jumblatt and his son Taymour Jumblatt (Progressive Socialist Party), Gebran Bassil (Free Patriotic Movement), Samir Geagea (Lebanese Forces), Mohammed Raad (Hezbollah), Samy Gemayel (Kataeb), Sulaiman Frangieh (Marada) and Ibrahim Azar (Nabih Berri bloc).

Mustapha Adib, Lebanon's prime minister-designate, said on Wednesday he wants to swiftly form a government of specialists to implement urgent reforms that can regain the trust of the Lebanese and the international community.

Earlier the 48-year-old diplomat held talks with MPs over the formation of a new crisis Cabinet.

During the talks the Future Movement called for "the swift formation of a government of specialists," while the Hezbollah bloc said it wanted to see a government that is "effective, productive and coherent, and understands the

political reality.”

However, Berri’s bloc insisted on keeping the finance portfolio as a “fundamental matter” amid signs of a looming dispute over who will take over the Ministry of Finance.

The Progressive Socialist Party called for “a capable government that makes reforms first, starting with the French initiative which is the last chance.”

The Lebanese Forces’ bloc demanded a government that is “independent, made of specialists and committed to neutrality,” and also announced that the party will not be part of government.

Meanwhile, the Free Patriotic Movement called for “rotating ministries,” with a reassignment of portfolios allocated for other parties.

MP Osama Saad described the events as “the new look of an expired system.”

“The crises and collapses will not stop in Lebanon,” he said.

Following the talks, Adib said that “there is more common ground among the Lebanese than points of disagreement, which can be resolved by dialogue.”

After a meeting with the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai on Wednesday, the Maronite patriarchs called for “a salvation government that does not have any party or political affiliation, with the necessary exceptional powers to be able to make reforms, combat corruption and achieve economic advancement.”

The patriarchs said that “Arab and international concern should be a building block for Lebanon’s salvation.”



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Lebanon PM designate pledges to form 'expert govt' in record time
Lebanon leaders have promised cabinet within two weeks, says Macron

[US: Turkey-sent Syrian fighters generate backlash in Libya](#)

Author:

By SAMY MAGDY | AP

ID:

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Wed, 2020-09-02 20:11

CAIRO: A US report said the presence of thousands of Syrian mercenaries sent by Turkey to Libya to fight on the side of the UN-supported government was likely to degrade security and generate backlash from the Libyan public. The US Defense Department's inspector general also said in a new report that it was concerned about the growing presence of Russian mercenaries fighting for the rivals of the Tripoli-based government in the Libyan war.

The report, which was released Tuesday, said Turkey has sent to Libya at least 5,000 Syrian mercenaries who previously worked closely with Ankara in Syria's civil war. They were sent to help Tripoli-allied militias fight the forces of east-based military commander Khalifa Haftar.

Turkey also deployed several hundred regular troops to Libya, including operators and technicians for Turkish air defense systems deployed in western Libya, the report said.

While the Syrian mercenaries have bolstered the UN-supported government's position, "their continued presence will continue to negatively affect the overall security situation in Libya," said the report, which covers the second quarter of 2020.

Libya was plunged into chaos when a NATO-backed uprising in 2011 toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, who was later killed. The country has since split between rival east- and west-based administrations, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

Haftar's forces launched an offensive in April 2019 trying to capture Tripoli. But his campaign collapsed in June when the Tripoli-allied militias, with heavy Turkish support, gained the upper hand, driving his forces from the outskirts of the city and other western towns.

Fighting has died down in recent weeks, but both sides were preparing for a possible battle over the strategic city of Sirte, the gateway to Libya's major oil fields and export terminals, controlled by Haftar.

The chaos has worsened in recent months as foreign backers increasingly intervene, despite pledges to the contrary at a high-profile peace summit in

Berlin earlier this year. Thousands of mercenaries including Russians, Syrians and Sudanese are fighting on both sides of the conflict. The US Africa Command, or AFRICOM, described the Syrian mercenaries fighting with the Tripoli-based government as “inexperienced, uneducated, and motivated by promises of considerable salary.” It said Turkish private military company Sadat has overseen supervision and payment to the mercenaries.

Increasing reports of theft, sexual assault and misconduct by Syrian mercenaries in western areas are likely to further degrade the security situation and generate backlash from the Libyan public, AFRICOM said. The report says extremists with previous militant links have been involved in the Tripoli fighting, although “it is possible they were fighting for financial and personal reasons rather than ideological reasons.”

Protests took place over deteriorating economic conditions last month in the capital and elsewhere in western Libya, which is controlled by forces loyal to the UN-supported government. Tripoli militias opened fire on demonstrators with rifles and truck-mounted guns and abducted some of the protesters. The US military has grown increasingly concerned about Russia’s growing influence in Libya, where at least 3,000 Russian mercenaries and 2,000 Russia-sponsored Syrian mercenaries backing Haftar’s army, the report said.



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Turkey to hold military exercise off Cyprus amid Mediterranean tensions
Turkey detains top Daesh member

[Israel to withhold bodies of all Palestinian militants](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-02 23:14

JERUSALEM: Israel decided Wednesday to withhold the bodies of all slain Palestinian militants in a bid to deter attacks, a move slammed by rights groups as “barbaric.”

Prior to the decision, approved by the government’s security cabinet, Israel retained the bodies of militants only from Hamas, the rulers of Gaza.

The new policy would see Israel not return the bodies of any Palestinian killed during or as a result of an anti-Israeli attack.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz welcomed the cabinet’s decision, which he said was part of a broader campaign of “deterrence.”

“Not returning terrorist bodies is part of our commitment to the safety of Israeli citizens, and of course to returning the boys home,” he said, referring to the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas in Gaza since a 2014 war.

Hamas is also believed to be holding two Israeli citizens who entered Gaza alone and whose families say have mental health issues.

The decision came two days after the latest Qatari-mediated deal between Israel and Hamas to end more than three weeks of cross-border attacks.

The deal was condemned by Leah and Simcha Goldin, the parents of one of the soldiers missing in Gaza.

“The money will be transferred to Gaza, the crossings and fishing zone will open. And the boys? The boys will remain there some more,” they wrote on Twitter.

Rights group Adalah called Israel’s decision “extreme, barbaric” and “illegal.”

“The policy of using human bodies as bargaining chips violates the most basic universal values and international law which prohibit cruel and inhuman treatment,” they said in a statement.



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Hamas, Israel agree to cease-fire over border violence Israel strikes Hamas in Gaza over rockets, fire balloons

[Hamas, Israel agree to cease-fire over border violence](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-02 02:10

GAZA CITY: Hamas and Israel on Tuesday agreed to a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip following three weeks of border violence.

The sides committed to implementing the terms of a truce brokered by Egypt, Qatar, and the UN in October 2018.

Observers said the agreement would allow Israel to switch its focus to fighting the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in the country where 117,241 cases had so far been recorded.

In a statement issued immediately after the cease-fire was announced, the head of Hamas' political office in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, said the agreement would contribute to "containing escalation and stopping the Israeli aggression" on Gaza.

Hamas added that a number of projects aimed at alleviating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Gaza would soon be announced.

Following the truce agreement, Israel reopened the only commercial crossing through which goods and fuel can pass to the enclave at Kerem Shalom, after restrictions had been imposed three weeks ago stopping fuel supplies, which resulted in power cuts throughout Gaza.

The Israelis also allowed the resumption of fishing for a distance of 15 nautical miles (28 km) out to sea.

Factions in Gaza agreed to stop launching rockets and incendiary balloons into Israeli communities, and to end night protests.

Hamas officials were understood to have been mainly calling for a return to the terms of the 2018 accord and the suspension of Great Return March activities. At the time, the understandings included vital projects funded by Qatar in relation to resolving Gaza's long-running electricity supply crisis, the opening of an industrial zone at the Erez border crossing, the creation of job opportunities, and the easing of restrictions on exports and imports.

Hamas' political bureau member, Osama Hamdan, said: "The resistance is in scoring stage, and it has not come out of this confrontation losing, and what it has achieved is appropriate in the context of the continuation of the confrontation that aims to completely break the siege.

"The leadership of the resistance factions was interested in achieving an agreement that would allow our people to confront the (COVID-19) pandemic, and that the occupation would not benefit from this crisis to put pressure on our people."

Adnan Abu Amer, a columnist specializing in Israeli affairs, said that the agreement had been a point-scoring exercise for both sides but a victory for neither.

He added that Hamas was faced with deteriorating humanitarian and economic conditions in Gaza and the deal would allow vital projects to go ahead while giving Israel peace of mind over the threat of border attacks.

Amer noted that the COVID-19 outbreak in Gaza had heaped further pressure on Hamas.

However, journalist Fathi Sabah, felt that the agreement had achieved nothing for Hamas and Gaza and only carried "promises" to implement projects that had

already been agreed on, but Israel had refused to implement since 2018.

Sabah told Arab News: “ Hamas found itself obliged to respond to the efforts to calm down, as it is more aware than others that the situation in Gaza does not allow things to deteriorate into a war, as 2 million Palestinians are in exhausted conditions, and the (COVID-19) pandemic has made the situation worse.”



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Israel, Hamas agree to restore calm along Gaza border
Israel strikes Hamas in Gaza over rockets, fire balloons

[Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia ‘aimed at stopping coalition airstrikes’](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-02 01:59

AL-MUKALLA: A surge in drone, missile and explosive-laden boat attacks on Saudi Arabia by the Houthi militia is seeking to pressure the Kingdom into stopping airstrikes that have killed dozens of their senior commanders in

Yemen, Yemeni military officials and experts said on Tuesday.

The Arab coalition has announced intercepting explosive-laden drones and boats and ballistic missiles fired by the rebels at Saudi civilian and military targets in the Kingdom and Yemen.

Airstrikes by coalition warplanes have targeted senior Houthi commanders mainly in the central provinces of Marib and Al-Bayda, and in the northern province of Jawf. The Houthis also want to force the Kingdom to stop its massive military logistics with the Yemeni army, the experts said.

“The coalition (warplanes) targeted their fortifications, military equipment, trenches, gatherings, command rooms as well as military reinforcements,” Brig. Gen. Abdu Abdullah Majili, a Yemeni army spokesman, told Arab News.

He said that the Houthis had suffered heavy losses over the last couple of weeks as a result of counterattacks by government forces and allied tribesmen under heavy air cover from coalition warplanes.

Houthi official media broadcast images of long convoys carrying bodies of rebel fighters. Local military officers told Arab News that many of those Houthis were killed in smart airstrikes by Saudi-led coalition warplanes in Jawf and Marib.

The Houthis, after failing to make a major military breakthrough with ground assaults, have turned to attacking Saudi Arabia to end their rising death count.

“The Houthis suffered fatal blows and a huge depletion of fighters during the current raging battles,” Majili added.

Coalition warplanes have been credited for tilting the balance of the war in favor of government forces and curbing the Houthis’ military expansion.

Houthi deaths have risen since the militia’s push to take control of the central city of Marib in the last couple of months, one Yemeni army officer said.

“The Houthis put their entire eggs in Marib’s basket, it is a ‘To be or not to be’ battle for them,” Col. Abdul Basit Al-Baher, a Yemeni army spokesman in the southern city of Taiz, told Arab News. “The Houthis are hungry for money and resources so they keep escalating pressure on Marib. Due to land and air surveillance, the coalition’s airstrikes have become more precise and can locate and target Houthi commanders on the battlefields.”

The internationally recognized government of Yemen said that hundreds of attacks by Houthis in the western province of Hodeidah killed almost 100 civilians and wounded dozens of others in July, as the rebels continue to obstruct the movement of UN monitors.



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Houthis in constant violation of de-escalation deals, Yemeni speaker says0IC condemns Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia