

Upgrade on track as Russian trains join Egypt rail fleet

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:27

CAIRO: Egypt's rail authority confirmed that a new batch of Russian railway cars has been shipped as part of a contract with the Russian Transmashholding Company to provide 1,300 carriages.

The batch includes 35 carriages on board two ships that are expected to dock at Alexandria before the end of August.

With the arrival of this batch, the number of Russian railway cars that have reached the Egyptian Railway Authority has increased to 68, including the 33 that arrived in two batches weeks ago and are now operating.

The new batch includes regular, dynamic-ventilated cars that will operate on main railways, named "improved second class."

According to plans, the batch is expected to enter service immediately after arrival and will form from three to four trains.

Mohamed Kamal, an Egyptian transport expert, said that with the arrival of the new batch of Russian railway cars in Egypt, the number of Russian trains operating on the lower and upper Egypt lines will increase to seven.

He explained that the plan is to receive new batches of 35 Russian cars every month, and to be in possession of over 240 new Russian railway carriages by the end of the year.

Kamal added that the cost of the 1,300 vehicles contracted with Russia is more than €1 billion (\$1.2 billion) and is financed in the form of a soft loan in collaboration with the Russian Exim Bank. The Russian cars will operate on main lines only.

The agreement with the Russian-Hungarian alliance led by the Transmashholding Company includes the supply of the 1,300 vehicles.

The contract includes the manufacture and supply of 800 air-conditioned vehicles, including 500 air-conditioned third class carriages, which is a new service that is offered to passengers for the first time in the history of the Egyptian railways. The contract also includes 180 second-class air conditioned cars, 90 first-class air-conditioned cars and 30 air-conditioned buffet trolleys.

The rail authority began operating the first three Russian trains to join the fleet just before Eid Al-Adha, after President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi assigned them to transport passengers during the holidays.

The railway commissioned the trains to work on lines between Cairo to Alexandria as well as from Cairo to Aswan. The Russian train now operates alongside a fleet of Spanish, French, Romanian, German and Egyptian trains.



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Egyptian rail on track as first Russian trains arrive

[Destabilization in eastern Med continues amid tension between France and Turkey](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:24

ISTANBUL: In the face of French President Emmanuel Macron's commitment to send temporary military reinforcements to the eastern Med, the region could turn into a scene of escalating disputes.

Now the key question is whether the row will be resolved through diplomatic negotiations or military retaliations amid a climate of tension.

French armed forces announced on Thursday that they will send two Rafale fighter jets and the naval frigate Lafayette to the region as a precaution

against heightened tensions with Ankara, which were sparked by disagreements over Turkey's oil and gas exploration in the disputed waters.

Triggered by competing claims to natural gas reserves in the region, the quarrel escalated this week with the arrival of Turkish seismic research vessel Oruc Reis, escorted by warships, in a controversial area of the Mediterranean which Greece claims under its continental shelf.

"The situation in the eastern Mediterranean is worrying. Turkey's unilateral decisions on oil exploration are causing tensions. These must end in order to allow a peaceful dialogue between neighboring countries and allies within NATO," Macron tweeted on Wednesday in French and in Greek.

In the meantime, the defense forces of France and Greece launched joint military exercises in the eastern Med to the south of the Greek island of Crete, while Macron urged Brussels last month to impose sanctions against Turkey for what he calls "violation of sovereignty" in the disputed waters.

Turkey is planning to issue gas exploration and drilling licenses in the region between the Greek island of Crete and Cyprus. However, French Total is one of the prominent companies that signed a contract with Cyprus for searching and drilling eastern Med gas, but it suspended the operations in the region over the tensions.

An extraordinary meeting of the bloc's foreign affairs ministers will be convened on Friday to discuss the dispute between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean.

"There is a strong incentive for most of the parties in the region to contain the present escalation and find an off-ramp to the crisis. The danger of miscalculation or an accident sending the conflict in a direction no one intends is rising to an unprecedented level," Prof. Michael Tanchum, a senior fellow at the Austrian Institute of European and Security Policy (AIES), told Arab News.

Ankara, whose relations with Paris have already been undermined over the Libyan conflict, is determined to make no concession over its drilling activities in the region.

But it also keeping the door open for dialogue.

"Turkey wants to resolve its disagreement with Greece over energy exploration in the eastern Mediterranean through dialogue," Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said on Wednesday. He added: "We want to reach political solutions through peaceful means in line with the international laws."

According to Tanchum, both Turkey and Greece now have a good measure of the positions of the other relevant regional and European actors.

"Each has made its own calculus. While several EU actors are either neutral or slightly leaning toward Turkey, any further action by Ankara would turn the EU unanimously against Turkey," he said.

Tanchum suggests that a third party needs to play an active role in defusing the current stand-off between Turkey and Greece.

“Perhaps the most hopeful sign now is the constructive efforts of the United States to achieve a cease-fire and perhaps buffer zone in Libya. The de-linking of flashpoints is necessary and the progress in Libya can create an opening for the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council emergency meeting tomorrow,” he said.

He added: “There is a window now for a face-saving climbdown. But that opportunity will need to be introduced by a third party with sufficient vision, diplomatic skill and commitment.”

A recent maritime deal signed between Greece and Egypt has also angered Ankara.

According to Gabriel Mitchell, director of external relations and policy fellow at the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies (Mitvim), it is difficult to imagine the EU delivering a statement that is substantially different from previous statements it has made on the issue – essentially supporting Greek sovereignty and calling for the parties to engage in direct negotiations.

“EU member states are relatively divided on this issue and how best to approach it,” he told Arab News.

The foreign ministers of Greece and the US – Nikos Dendias and Mike Pompeo – will meet in Vienna on Friday to discuss tensions in the eastern Mediterranean.

Mitchell thinks that this will be an important opportunity for the US to reaffirm its support for Greece and call the parties to the negotiating table.

“But with everything that is going on, both globally and domestically, it is hard to say whether Pompeo can offer much more. Greece will likely need to rely on a combination of regional, European and American support. Still, a strong, declarative statement by Pompeo would likely be enough to halt the current escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean,” he said.

Although both Athens and Ankara have declared their desire for direct negotiations, Mitchell considers that each side is at the same time trying to strengthen its position against the other and score some domestic points.

“This increases the risk that one or more Eastern Mediterranean actors miscalculate the other side, and there is an accidental or unintentional escalation,” he said.



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Erdogan says only solution in Mediterranean is dialogue
Erdogan: Turkey resumes energy exploration in east Mediterranean

[Beirut emergency law sparks fears of army crackdown](#)

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:08

BEIRUT: Lebanon's parliament has approved a two-week state of emergency in Beirut that gives sweeping powers to the army, prompting warnings of a crackdown on protests in the city.

The green light for the tough new measures comes 10 days after a deadly explosion in the capital killed more than 170 people, wounded 6,500 others and forced the Cabinet to step down.

In its first meeting since the blast, Lebanon's parliament on Thursday backed legislation allowing the army to ban gatherings deemed threats to national security and expanding the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians.

Human rights groups warned that the emergency law will give the Lebanese military extensive powers to quell protests and leave activists at the mercy

of military courts.

The Lebanese parliament met in Beirut's Unesco Palace complex after its headquarters were heavily damaged in the explosion.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

A decree imposing a state of emergency was issued by Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government the day after the explosion.

The government resigned five days later amid angry protests demanding "revenge" for the blast, which has been widely blamed on negligence by the authorities.

Sources told Arab News that the Lebanese judiciary is waiting on a report by French experts who joined rescue efforts and investigated the site of the explosion to determine its causes.

The Lebanese judiciary concluded that "according to investigations with officials under arrest and witnesses, the incident was due to negligence that allowed the storing of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate in a warehouse in the port for seven years without taking precautionary measures."

A source said that "the investigator in charge of the case has listened to the testimony of security officials."

Investigators will also interview former public works ministers Ghazi Aridi, Ghazi Zaiter and Youssef Fenianos along with former justice and finance ministers, including Salim Jreissati and Maj. Gen. Ashraf Rifi.

Meanwhile, complications surround the appointment of a judicial investigator.

Arab News has been told that the Higher Judicial Council considered appointing judge Tareq Al-Bitar, who was proposed by the caretaker justice minister. However, Al-Bitar declined the role.

Sources said that "Al-Bitar later was pressured by two Free Patriotic Movement ministers to retrieve his resignation, which led to the Higher Judicial Council expressing reservations over his nomination."

Eight MPs – Nadim Gemayel, Paula Yacoubian, Sami Gemayel, Elias Hankach, Michel Moawad, Neemat Frem, Henry Helou, and Marwan Hmadeh – have resigned following the explosion. The parliament session was boycotted by members of the Lebanese Forces bloc.

Protesters gathered near the Unesco Palace during the parliamentary session, chanting slogans and waving Lebanese flags.

Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri accused MPs who resigned of neglecting their duties while “the country is dying right in front of us.”

He called for the prompt formation of a new government “with a primary goal of fighting corruption and restoring Lebanese unity.”

The parliamentary session lasted for only 40 minutes but brought divisions between those calling for a parliamentary investigative committee and others demanding an international inquiry.

MP Usama Saad warned that the state of emergency will hinder public freedom.

“At this time we want the army and security forces to be a support to the people rather than being coercive agencies,” he said.

The White Shirts medical group, which treats people injured during protests, claimed that security forces had used lethal “shredded” bullets – an explosive projectile that causes massive internal injuries – against protesters in recent days.

The volunteer group held a press conference to show X-rays detailing shocking injuries among protesters taken to hospital.

Former health minister Mohammed Jawad Khalifeh was among the first to warn on Twitter against use of the bullets.

Hundreds of volunteers gathered in Martyrs’ Square to help remove rubble and broken glass from houses, office blocks and shops throughout the devastated city.

More than 180 aircraft had carried emergency aid to Lebanon by Thursday. The relief operation is being coordinated by the Lebanese army, which is storing and distributing material including food, tents and medical supplies.

After arriving in Beirut on Thursday, David Hale, US state undersecretary for political affairs, said in a statement: “Economic and fiscal reforms are needed, and an end to dysfunctional governments and empty promises.

“All Lebanese want to see a Lebanon guided by the Lebanese people that fulfills their ambitions and needs, not those of others.

“The US is ready to support a Lebanese government that reflects and responds to the will of the people, and genuinely commits and acts for real change.”

Hale said that the FBI will join Lebanese and international investigators at the invitation of the Lebanese “in order to help answer questions that I know everyone has about the circumstances that led up to this explosion and to work with Lebanon in this regard.”

Florence Parly, France’s armed forces minister, also arrived in the capital, while Mohammad Jawad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, is due to arrive on Friday.



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FBI to join Beirut blast probe, Lebanon must end 'empty promises' Macron warns
Iran: Don't meddle in Lebanon's fightback from Beirut blast

[Search stepped up after Egyptian ferry sinking](#)

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:28

CAIRO: Four people returning from a wedding are believed to have drowned after a ferry sank in a canal in Egypt's northern El-Beheira governorate on Thursday.

Families of the victims gathered at the scene, outside the village of Dimishli, after rescue teams found the body of one of the passengers.

Three passengers were rescued from the canal and taken to Menoufia General Hospital.

Rescue teams identified one of the victims as Muhammad Abdullah Al-Sarsi, 27, whose body was found about 4 km away.

The Egyptian Public Prosecution ordered an investigation into the sinking as well as a report on the condition of the ferry.

Maj. Gen. Hisham Amna, El-Beheira's governor, visited the scene and confirmed there were seven passengers on board.

The three still missing are Muhammad Abdullah Abdul Qadir, Ahmed Abdel Fattah Shendi and Mahmoud Hamdi Shendi.

The governor said that he directed security and rescue teams to the site to provide support.

Amna announced 10,000 Egyptian pounds (\$628) of aid to families of the victims, and said efforts would be stepped up to recover the bodies.

MP Mahmoud Saad claimed the ferry sank because it was overloaded.

Equipment on board included cookware, which added to the already heavy load.

Saad said that a review of ferry control and maintenance is needed urgently.

The MP said he will submit a statement on the circumstances of the accident and demand action.

"There must be a ferry supervisor who does checks before it sets off. There also needs to be nearby river rescue points, periodic maintenance, worker training and a work permit requirement," he said.

"This is not the first ferry accident and we have repeatedly talked about the need for tighter control. We need regular ferry inspections," he added.

Ahmed Ismail, an eyewitness, told Arab News that the ferry passengers were returning from a wedding. The wedding cook and his assistants were among those on the vessel.



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[Political novices drawn to rally against Netanyahu](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-13 02:07

JERUSALEM: In a summer of protests against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the accusations of corruption and calls for him to resign could be accompanied by another familiar refrain: "I've never done this before."

The boisterous rallies have brought out a new breed of first-time protesters – young, middle-class Israelis who have little history of political activity but feel that Netanyahu's scandal-plagued rule and his handling of the coronavirus crisis have robbed them of their futures. It is a phenomenon that could have deep implications for the country's leaders.

"It's not only about the COVID-19 and the government's handling of the situation," said Shachar Oren, a 25-year-old protester. "It's also about the people that cannot afford to eat and cannot afford to live. I am one of those people."

Oren is among the thousands of people who gather outside Netanyahu's official residence in Jerusalem several times a week, calling on the longtime leader to resign. The young demonstrators have delivered a boost of momentum to a movement of older, more established protesters who have been saying Netanyahu should step down when he is on trial for corruption charges.

The loose-knit movements have joined forces to portray Netanyahu as an out-of-touch leader, with the country's most bloated government in history and seeking hundreds of thousands of dollars of tax benefits for himself at a time when the coronavirus outbreak is raging and unemployment has soared to over 20 percent.

Many of the young protesters have lost their jobs or seen their career prospects jeopardized. They have given the protests a carnival-like atmosphere, pounding on drums and dancing in the streets in colorful costumes while chanting vitriolic slogans against the prime minister.

Netanyahu has tried to dismiss the protesters as "leftists" or "anarchists." Erel Segal, a commentator close to the prime minister, has called the gatherings "a Woodstock of hatred."

Despite such claims, there are no signs that any opposition parties are organizing the gatherings. Politicians have been noticeably absent from most of the protests.

Israel has a long tradition of political protest, be it peace activists, West Bank settlers or ultra-Orthodox Jews. The new wave of protesters seems to be characterized by a broader, mainstream appeal.

"The partisan issue is totally missing, and the party organizations are not present," said Tamar Hermann, a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank and expert on protest movements.

Hermann said the protesters resemble many other protest movements around the world. "They are mostly middle class," she said. "And they were kicked out of work."

Oren, for instance, said he used to survive on a modest salary as a software analyst thanks to training he received in an Israeli military high-tech unit. Then he moved into tutoring – offering lessons in English, computers and chess to schoolchildren.

He said things were not easy, but he was “too busy surviving” to think about political activity. That changed when the coronavirus crisis began in March.

Oren’s business crashed.

With unemployment soaring, Netanyahu and his rival, Benny Gantz, formed a coalition with 34 Cabinet ministers, the largest government in Israel’s history. Beyond the generous salaries, these ministers, many with vague titles, enjoy perks like drivers, security guards and office space, and can hand out jobs to cronies.

A Netanyahu ally dismissed reports that people were having trouble feeding their families as “BS.”

Oren said he became “furious,” and about two months ago, he went to his first protest against the nation’s leaders. “They are there because we gave them the power and want them to help us. And they’re not doing anything,” he explained.

Oren now treks to Jerusalem from his home in the city of Kfar Saba in central Israel, about an hour away, three times a week. He is easily recognizable with his poster that says “House of Corruption,” depicting Netanyahu in a pose similar to Kevin Spacey’s nefarious “House of Cards” character, Frank Underwood.

Oren says he does not belong to any political party or any of the movements organizing the rallies, but that the diverse group of activists all want similar things. “No to the corruption, the poverty, the detachment. We’re just saying enough,” he said.

University student Stav Piltz went through a similar evolution. Living in downtown Jerusalem near Netanyahu’s residence, she quickly noticed the demonstrations in her neighborhood when they began several months ago. She talked to protesters as well as local residents at the cafe where she waitressed before she was laid off.

She said she noticed a common theme. “They feel that something is very critical now in the political climate and no one is listening to the citizens and the pain we are experiencing,” she said.

But Piltz said the spark that drew her to protest was a national strike last month by the country’s social workers.

Piltz, herself a social work student, said she has a history of social activism but has never been involved with party politics. The collection of women, coming from different religious, political, ethnic and racial backgrounds, was a powerful sight. “This is where I saw how much power we have when we are together,” she said.

The demonstrations, which have gained strength in recent weeks, are the largest sustained wave of public protests since hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in 2011 to draw attention to the country’s high cost of living. While those protests ultimately fizzled, two of their leaders

entered parliament, and one, Itzik Shmuli, is now the country's welfare minister.

Both Piltz and Oren said they are determined to keep up their activities in the long term.

"People have nothing to lose. So it's very easy to go demonstrate these days, especially if you're young and you see no future here," Piltz said.

Hermann, the political analyst, said too many Israeli youths have been "politically ignorant" and that it is a "very good sign" for the country's democracy that people are becoming involved.

The leaders, however, may not be so pleased to face a politically aware young generation.

"They are much more difficult to be controlled while they gain political views and confidence," she said.



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Netanyahu's uneasy alliance seems headed toward collapse 'Your time is up':
Thousands protest against Netanyahu over economy, corruption allegations