

Palestinians fear expulsion for Jerusalem high-tech hub

Author:

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JERUSALEM: Palestinian business owners in occupied East Jerusalem are worried they will be forced to shut up shop by Israeli authorities over plans to build a vast high-tech hub in their neighborhood.

The main thoroughfare through the Wadi El-Joz area, close to Jerusalem's Old City, is lined by mechanic workshops and usually hums with the sound of car horns.

But business owners are facing an uncertain future, with fears that more than 200 premises could be forced to close including garages and popular restaurants.

Fathi Al-Kurd, whose workshop opened in 1966, is worried that he and his two sons will not be offered another location.

"My son has four children, if he doesn't work for a week his children will starve," the 77-year-old said.

"We can't confront this government, but we ask that they at least provide us with an alternative," he added.

His son Muhannad Al-Kurd, a car electrician, said a municipal official visited them last summer and warned "eviction is coming."

East Jerusalem was occupied by Israel in 1967 and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community.

The Jerusalem municipality aims to create a "new high-tech center" that would "reduce social gaps and economic inequality in East Jerusalem," according to city hall.

The \$600 million project has allocated 250,000 square meters (2.7 billion square feet) of land for the technology park. A further 50,000 square meters has been earmarked for other businesses, and the same amount for hotels.

Several Palestinian families own land in the industrial zone of East Jerusalem, including Naif Al-Kiswani who says they will inevitably be drawn into the Israeli project.

"I want to be compensated financially and given licenses to build shops, businesses and flats," he said, sitting inside his hardware store.

Al-Kiswani confirmed that talks about the redevelopment were underway with Israeli officials, with a meeting planned soon between Palestinian landowners and Jerusalem's deputy mayor.

"The project exists and our refusal won't change anything, but we must not lose everything," he said.

Concerns over the redevelopment come as businesses are gradually reopening, after measures to tackle the novel coronavirus brought the city to a standstill.

Muhannad Al-Kurd said his income fell by 70 percent in recent months and the new project could bring further financial losses.

"This eviction will make us start from scratch," he said.

Wearing a face mask at the garage where he works, Khalil Al-Hawash said the project aims to "empty the city of Palestinians."

Standing in front of a sign for the garage in both Arabic and Hebrew, he wanted to know whether there would be compensation or help to relocate elsewhere.

Economist Mohammed Qirsh says if the business owners are expelled without financial redress the impact would be “devastating.”

Some of those affected by the redevelopment plans aim to form a committee to challenge the decision.

The president of the Palestinian Chamber of Commerce in Jerusalem, Kamal Obidat, described it as a plan to “liquidate” parts of the city and “Judaize” them.



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[UAE supports Egypt's Libya initiative](#)

Mon, 2020-06-08 23:52

CAIRO: Voicing support for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's Libya initiative, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash on Monday called it a step toward a political solution.

“With the support of the United States National Security Council for the

Egyptian initiative, Arab and international momentum for an immediate cease-fire, a withdrawal of foreign forces and a return to the political track is strengthened," Gargash tweeted.

Libya has had no stable central authority since Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown by NATO-backed rebels in 2011. The country has been split since 2014 between rival administrations in its east and west.

The Egyptian initiative calls for negotiations in Geneva and the exit of all "foreign mercenaries" from Libya. The plan has garnered support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia, Jordan and Bahrain.

Gargash said the international community cannot accept that fighting continues, and a comprehensive political solution is needed for all Libyan parties to the conflict.

The United States National Security Council on Sunday tweeted that it was encouraged by Egypt's plan.

But the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) has rejected the initiative. In a series of rapid victories, the GNA has, with Turkish support, brought most of northwest Libya back under its control.

Despite the proposal by Egypt, which backs rival Libyan forces commanded by Khalifa Haftar, GNA forces on Monday pressed their advance.

El-Sisi on Monday discussed the latest developments in Libya with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin over the phone. They expressed their resolve to ensure the launch of peace talks at the earliest.

A statement issued by the Kremlin said the Russian side praised Egypt's diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the Libyan crisis.

Egypt's proposal envisaged a cease-fire starting June 8. Haftar accepted it, as did Aguila Saleh, speaker of the country's east-based Parliament.

But the militias fighting to defend Tripoli rejected the proposal, and are pushing eastward toward the coastal city of Sirte, a former stronghold of Daesh that Haftar's forces captured in January.

Tripoli-based Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha said the GNA side would engage in political talks only after taking Sirte and the inland Jufra air base to the south.

Taking Sirte would open the gate for the Tripoli-allied militias to press even farther eastward, to potentially seize vital oil installations, terminals and oilfields that tribes allied with Haftar shut down earlier this year, cutting off Libya's major source of income.



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Libya's Tripoli forces press gains despite Egypt truce offer

[Construction sector faces severe contraction in Lebanon](#)

Mon, 2020-06-08 23:14

BEIRUT: A prominent member of the Lebanese engineering and construction sector has warned of dire consequences if the industry collapses.

Maroun El-Helou, chairman of the Syndicate of Contractors of Public Works and Buildings, said: "The collapse, if it occurs, will directly affect 700 contracting companies, 300 consulting firms, and 15,000 engineers working in companies or as freelancers in the public and private sectors. The collapse will affect 3,000 engineering offices and subcontractors and more than 150,000 administrators, technicians, and workers, in addition to workers in all other construction-related jobs."

El-Helou warned that a collapse could lead to “an exodus of skilled and specialized manpower as well as unemployment and starvation in Lebanon.”

The accumulated amount owed to contractors, engineers and consultants by the Lebanese government is approximately \$600 million. El-Helou said: “The irregular payments, plus the lack of a clear roadmap for state action in light of the exceptional conditions that Lebanon is experiencing has put all projects in limbo. This will be directly reflected by the decline of environmental, health and living conditions. The investments and projects will be lost because of the government’s lack of seriousness in dealing with the burning issues.”

Most of the projects carried out by contractors under the Council for Development and Reconstruction are related to infrastructure such as roads and water.

El-Helou said, “There are 18 projects under construction and we demanded the cancellation of contracts for these projects. The projects are worth about \$150 million and were funded locally. They were cancelled due to the failure to clear the bills which amounted to approximately \$40 million for nearly two years. The Ministry of Finance did not transfer funds in 2018 and 2019. We proposed that the state pay half of the amount and complete the projects, but the Council for Development and Reconstruction suggested that cancelling contracts for incomplete projects was the worst possible solution, because it would result in the loss of money spent on the projects without achieving the desired goals.”

He added: “There are projects that the government must pay for in dollars, but the payment is very late and is made in Lebanese pounds according to the official exchange rate of LBP1,507 (to the dollar). This led to the suspension of work, increased losses, and (led to) a rise in the dismissal of engineers and workers.”

The projects suffered a financial setback more than two years ago because of irregular payments by the Ministry of Finance. “The major catastrophe that most affected the entire engineering sector was the actions of banks in terms of imposing restrictions on the movement of funds for withdrawal or transfer,” El-Helou said.

“Today the dollar exchange rate has led to an increase in the high price of materials, the scarcity of materials and the inability to import them. That has in turn led to the suspension of work in most projects and dismissing engineers, employees, and workers by more than 50 percent.”

As for projects to which the state contributes 25 percent of financing, and to which international institutions such as the World Bank, plus Arab and foreign funds contribute 75 percent, the Ministry of Finance “does not pay its share, which makes projects faltering, slow, and in danger of being stopped,” according to El-Helou.

The Syndicate of Contractors of Public Works and Buildings has asked officials for solutions to the issues they face. Contractors became angry

when Lebanon's financial public prosecutor summoned 30 contractors and engineers a week ago to investigate media reports and information on social media regarding suspicious deals.

"We want accountability and transparency," El-Helou said, "and if fraud occurs, we will not protect anyone but we will appear before the competent judiciary and the Audit Bureau. The method of summoning without any documented information that warrants an investigation is unacceptable. Such action is not based on the professionalism and merit that the Lebanese judiciary has always enjoyed."

He added: "Targeting and defaming the sector without hard evidence is tantamount to demolishing the most important pillars of the national economy. It also weakens some 70 professions directly related to the work of engineers and contractors at a time when we are in dire need of reversing the faltering and traumatic economic cycle which underlies our political, financial and monetary problems."



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Protests set to resume in Lebanon but activists are no longer united
Lebanon overcomes sectarian strife as army declares zero tolerance

UN says 'encouraged' by Libyan calls to resume peace talks

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Sun, 2020-06-07 19:00

CAIRO: The United Nations on Sunday said it was encouraged by calls to resume talks on ending the conflict in Libya, a day after Egypt announced a unilateral peace initiative supported by the eastern Libyan camp.

The UN support mission in Libya said the fighting over the capital, Tripoli, for more than a year "has proven, beyond any doubt, that any war among Libyans is a losing war."

The statement urged Libyan parties to "engage swiftly and constructively" in the UN-brokered military talks aimed at reaching a lasting cease-fire agreement, "accompanied by firm implementation of and respect for the recently renewed UN Arms Embargo on Libya."

The UN said more than 16,000 Libyans were displaced in recent days by the latest bout of fighting in the capital and the town of Tarhouna, which lies 72 kilometers (45 miles) southeast.

Oil-rich Libya has been in turmoil since 2011 when a civil war toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, who was later killed.

Last year, the commander of the eastern Libyan forces, Khalifa Haftar, launched a campaign to capture Tripoli from the UN-supported but weak government there. After months of stalemate, the clashes intensified as foreign backers of both sides increasingly intervened.

Egypt's initiative to end the fighting came on the heels of major losses by Haftar's forces in western Libya in recent weeks.

Libyan Crimes Watch, a UK-based rights group monitoring the Libyan war, said Turkish drone strikes by Tripoli-allied forces hit vehicles carrying fleeing residents of the town of Tarhouna on Saturday, killing at least 10 civilians including two children and wounding another.

A spokesman for the Tripoli-allied forces did not immediately respond to calls seeking comment.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on Saturday announced his initiative to end the civil war, saying the road map includes a cease-fire starting Monday and is meant to pave the way for elections in the North African country.

Haftar is backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia. The Tripoli-allied militias are aided by Turkey, Qatar and Italy.

Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte spoke by phone Sunday with the Egyptian president. Conte's office said the conversation centered on "regional stability, with particular attention to the need for a rapid cease-fire and a return to the negotiating table in Libya."

There was no comment on the Egyptian initiative from either the UN-supported government in Tripoli or its foreign backers.

Nevertheless, the UN support mission in Libya said it was encouraged by the

recent calls to resume talks.

“The Mission, as ever, stands ready to convene a fully inclusive Libyan-led and Libyan-owned political process,” it said.



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UN: Numerous reports of looting in Libyan towns retaken by Turkey-backed GNA
Egypt's El-Sisi: Foreign interference in Libya threatens stability in region

[Lebanon overcomes sectarian strife as army declares zero tolerance](#)

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Sun, 2020-06-07 22:54

BEIRUT: Following a night of violence, calm was restored in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon on Sunday, with the army warning against dragging the country into chaos that could endanger “national unity.”

Riots broke out in central Beirut and other areas after videos circulated on

social media showing some supporters of the Amal Movement, and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, chanting sectarian insults targeting revered religious figures.

The overnight violence left 25 soldiers injured. The Lebanese Army issued a statement vowing action against those who jeopardize the "state's security." Riot police fired tear gas at protesters, after Saturday's attempt to reboot anti-government demonstrations quickly degenerated into rioting and stone-throwing confrontations between opposing camps. Lebanese troops deployed to separate the rival groups, and the tensions eventually subsided before dawn on Sunday.

Protesters also called for Hezbollah's disarmament. According to the army's statement, seven people – four Syrians, one Palestinian and two Sudanese nationals – were arrested for rioting.

All political and religious parties unanimously condemned the sectarian incident and sought to contain the strife.

President Michel Aoun called on all political and religious leaders and citizens, who lived through the events of 1975-1976, to take all possible measures against such elements to ensure national cohesion.

Aoun warned: "Any security setback – if it occurs – will not be in anyone's interest."

The head of the Bar Association, Melhem Khalaf, said: "Were the 17 years of senseless fighting, 200,000 deaths and displacement of 1 million people was not enough?"

As people in the street and on social media expressed their anger and disgust at what happened during the civil protest, it was announced that a protest scheduled to take place on Sunday outside the US Embassy in Beirut had been canceled.

The protest, which was going to be organized by Hezbollah supporters, was to denounce US interference in Lebanon's internal affairs.

Dr. Ziad Abdel Samad, researcher in development and public affairs, told Arab News: "Indeed, people are repulsed by what happened, but it will not prevent them from taking to the streets again to demand their rights."

He said: "The movement that resumed on Saturday is a continuation of the Oct. 17 revolution. People are free to voice their demands. The majority raised economic slogans, and if some called for disarming Hezbollah, that does not mean they should be accused of treachery. Saturday's demonstrations surprised the authorities, so they decided to respond with violence in which they reminded us that they can repeat what they did on May 7, 2008, when Hezbollah militarily seized control of Beirut after clashing with the Future Movement as well as the Progressive Socialist Party in Mount Lebanon. About 100 people were killed then."

Abdel Samad added: "What happened on Saturday will not eliminate the civil movement, which is committed to its demands and to pressuring for the reestablishment of the authority by forming a government with powers that allow it to draft a new electoral law, as happened in Tunisia."

He said: "The current government is unable to accomplish anything. Even the negotiation between the government and the International Monetary Fund were not serious. It seems as if the government, and especially Hezbollah, do not want to resort to this option to save the country's economy. They want to resort to their choice: Iran. In this sense, Hezbollah does not care about Lebanon – either it takes control or the country gets burned down."

Public affairs expert and activist Dr. Walid Fakhreddin told Arab News: "Hezbollah previously caused such tensions four or five times since the protests started on Oct. 17. However, this is the first time this happened under the government of Hassan Diab. This means that Diab's government is in crisis, and this is Hezbollah's way (of operating) when it does not want a government to continue."

Fakhreddin added: "On the other hand, no one is ready to stand up to Hezbollah. I believe Diab's government is unable to continue and will not manage to obtain funds to prevent economic collapse."

He said whatever happened on Saturday was a response to the protesters' demand to disarm Hezbollah "because another protest with this demand took place a few days ago outside the Palace of Justice in Beirut, and Hezbollah did not respond that time."

He added: "I think Hezbollah was surprised that people took to the streets despite being intimidated and amid a pandemic."

Political analyst Ghassan Hajjar, though, told Arab News: "What happened is new. It is not an extension of Oct. 17, but rather it will mark the start of a new stage.

"Hezbollah is in crisis more than ever because it believes the threat against it is increasing and has become direct. The civil movement is targeting Hezbollah by raising the demand for its disarmament. Hezbollah is afraid of what is introduced regionally by federations that are tearing apart the Iranian axis.

"No one won on Saturday – not the government, the Hezbollah nor the protesters. Everyone lost," he added. "I do not think that toppling the Diab's government needs these clashes. Bringing it down requires a political decision by Hezbollah. It is true that there is talk about a government change, but it will only happen if Hezbollah is convinced that Saad Hariri will return to head the government and control the Sunnis.

"Hariri's return to the government is in the interest of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) after the losses it suffered as it does not have a Sunni cover, and the Shiite cover is not enough if the FPM considered the republic's presidency. However, no agreement with Hariri has been reached."



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Protests set to resume in Lebanon but activists are no longer united
Troops use tear gas as violent clashes rock Beirut