

# Tunisian parliament debates new coalition with economy in focus

Author:

Thu, 2020-02-27 01:10

TUNIS: Tunisia's parliament began debating on Wednesday and looked set to approve a new coalition government, after months of political wrangling that has slowed the north African country's efforts to tackle looming economic problems.

Elyes Fakhfakh, who was designated prime minister last month by President Kais Saied, has brought parties from across the political spectrum into his Cabinet – and they continue to disagree on several big policy areas.

His government is expected to pass a confidence vote later on Wednesday, however, though it may prove fragile after struggling to reconcile the differences over policy and Cabinet positions.

If it were to lose the vote, another parliamentary election would be held.

The last election, held in October, produced a deeply fragmented house in which no party won more than a quarter of the seats. An earlier attempt to form a government was defeated in a confidence vote in January.

Introducing his proposed government's program in parliament on Wednesday, Fakhfakh said its priorities would include fighting widespread corruption and reforming public services and the state phosphate producer.

It would work to maintain the value of the currency, which has recovered in recent months after years of decline, he added. Central Bank Governor Marwan Abbasi said this month that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had been in favor of the dinar losing some value to bolster exports.

The new government would immediately face a major economic challenge after years of low growth, persistent unemployment, big government deficits, mounting debt, high inflation, a weak currency and deteriorating public services.

It will need to find new external financing after an IMF loan program ends in April, with no new support yet agreed.

Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi said he would also start the process for voting judges onto the constitutional court, a body agreed in the 2014 constitution to arbitrate disputes between branches of government but not yet set up.



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## [Rival Libyan politicians meet for peace talks in Geneva](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-02-27 00:51

GENEVA: Rival Libyan politicians met on Wednesday for UN-sponsored political talks in Geneva aimed at ending the latest round of fighting over the country's capital, Tripoli.

The resumption of political negotiations, one of three ongoing UN-mediated diplomatic tracks, followed an agreement this week between military officials to formalize a shaky cease-fire around Tripoli.

The declared cease-fire deal, now under review by Libya's competing leaders, addresses the return of thousands of displaced civilians to Tripoli. But it makes no mention of key points of contention, such as the withdrawal of eastern-based forces or the demobilization of formidable militias loosely allied with the UN-supported Tripoli government.

Peace negotiations have made halting progress over past weeks, as low-intensity clashes continue around Tripoli and weapons flow into the war-torn

country despite world powers' pledges to the contrary at a peace summit in Berlin last month.

## **Oli blockade**

Meanwhile, Eastern Libya's foreign minister said on Wednesday that his government, parallel to the Tripoli administration, could not force eastern tribesmen to lift an oil blockade that he said was a "popular decision."

The embattled Tripoli government has increasingly relied on Turkey to supply military aid, including air defenses and fighters deployed from nearby Syria, to repel Haftar's advances.

The commander of the eastern forces, Khalifa Haftar, and his followers, who control the country's east and south, launched an offensive to capture Tripoli last April. The fighting has displaced more than 150,000 people and killed hundreds of civilians.

"We cannot use our power to lift the blockade," Abdulhadi Lahweej told journalists in Geneva, alleging that the Tripoli government was using revenues from oil to pay for thousands of mercenaries he says have come from Syria to help them.

He also reiterated that his side, led by eastern commander Khalifa Haftar, would not participate in political talks due to begin in Geneva on Wednesday, saying there was no agreement with the U.N. mission on the composition of their delegation.

"The participation for the moment is suspended," he said.

The United Nations had planned to bring together lawmakers from both sides of Libya's conflict on Wednesday to end the fighting over Tripoli as part of a dialogue encompassing military, political and economic strands.



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Libya rivals announce will not take part in Geneva talks

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## [Iran expert: Regime brutality will not dissuade protests](#)

Thu, 2020-02-27 00:34

LONDON: Iran's failure to prevent violence against its own people by security forces, or to hold senior officials to account, will not dissuade protesters, said the president of the International American Council following the release of a new report by Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"Straightforward repression and the use of brute force is something that Iranian people have been enduring for a long time, and they can be expected to continue pushing back against it with extraordinary resilience," Dr. Majid Rafizadeh, who is also a political scientist at Harvard University, told Arab News.

"This was made clear during the previous nationwide uprising, when dozens of peaceful protesters were killed, either by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

(IRGC) gunfire or by torturous interrogations following their arrest. Yet the uprising continued for some time," he said.

"The US and Europe have the capabilities to provide large segments of the Iranian population with tools that would help them to go on organizing against the regime and countering the IRGC's efforts to suppress the population."

HRW said Iran had failed to hold its security forces accountable for violence, including unlawful lethal force against civilians, during mass demonstrations that broke out in November 2019.

Tehran, it said, had also yet to reveal the number of people killed, injured or arrested during the protests. HRW urged the UN Human Rights Council to take action against the regime.

Amnesty International said at least 304 people had been killed by security forces. HRW reported Iranian politician Hossein Naghavi Hosseini as saying as many as 7,000 people had been detained.

Families of victims, it added, had been warned and in some cases threatened by the authorities not to talk to the media or to try to hold public protests or commemorations on behalf of their relatives.

HRW said there had also been reports of mass abuse of prisoners in detention, and at least three demonstrators in custody had been sentenced to death.

"Iranian authorities have systematically repressed dissent for decades, and they are now confronting popular protests with an astonishing level of violence," said Michael Page, HRW's deputy Middle East director.

"Principled international voices should send an unequivocal message that Iran cannot get away with killing protesters."

HRW said it had evidence of lethal force being used illegally against people, with members of the public, including children on their way to school, being shot at by security forces. Eyewitnesses said heavy machine guns had been deployed against unarmed protesters.

HRW said Iran was in breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' guarantee of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as multiple facets of the UN's Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, which it said justified lethal force "only when strictly necessary to protect life."

In addition, HRW said Tehran had broken Article 4 of its own law on the use of firearms by law enforcement against demonstrators, which permits the use of lethal force only when all other avenues, including clear verbal warnings and nonlethal weaponry, have been exhausted.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has referred to protesters killed in clashes as "rioters," a phrase that has been echoed by other members of the government and by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Rouhani told the Iranian Cabinet on Nov. 23 that the protesters “were organized, had plans, and were armed and were directed by backward forces in the region, Zionists and the US.”



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Iran condemned over concealing coronavirus figures as 24 arrested over 'rumors' US targets Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia active in Iraq

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## [Iran condemned over concealing coronavirus figures as 24 arrested over 'rumors'](#)

Author:

Amir Havasi | AFP

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Wed, 2020-02-26 16:38

TEHRAN: Iran “seems to be concealing information about the (coronavirus) epidemic,” Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) on Wednesday said.

It condemned what it termed "Iran's persecution of media outlets and journalists publishing independent information."

Reza Moini, head of RSF's Iran desk, said: "Respect for the public's right to full, independent, diverse and quality news reporting... is the best way to protect the population and combat rumors. Withholding information can kill." President Hassan Rouhani, for his part, accused Iran's arch foe the US of trying to use propaganda about the virus to instil "fear" against his country.

The Americans "themselves are struggling with coronavirus," Rouhani said in a weekly cabinet meeting.

He added that "16,000 people have died of influenza there but they don't talk about their own (dead)."

Rouhani's remarks came a day after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Iran of concealing the full extent of the outbreak, saying "Tehran may have suppressed vital details."

The virus has also infected Iranian officials.

Deputy health minister Harirchi had coughed and repeatedly wiped sweat from his brow at a joint news conference Monday with government spokesman Ali Rabiei, who is now himself awaiting the results of a coronavirus test. Harirchi stirred controversy at the time by denying a lawmaker's claim that 50 people had died from the virus in Qom, the epicenter of Iran's outbreak. The latest health ministry figures show the virus has spread across the country.

There were 15 new cases in Qom, nine in Gilan in the north, four in the capital Tehran and three in Fars in southern Iran, it said.

Meanwhile, Iranian cyber police on Wednesday announced the arrests of 24 people accused of online rumor-mongering about the spread of a coronavirus outbreak that has claimed 19 lives in the country.

The Islamic republic is scrambling to contain COVID-19 a week after announcing the first two deaths in Qom, a center for Islamic studies that draws pilgrims and scholars from abroad.

Schools, universities and cultural centers have been closed, sporting events canceled and teams of sanitary workers deployed to disinfect buses, trains and public spaces.

International health experts have expressed concern about Iran's handling of the outbreak – the deadliest for any country other than China.

Such worries mounted on Tuesday when the head of the taskforce combatting the virus, Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi, admitted he himself had been infected.

But health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said the situation was "improving," even as he announced four more deaths and 44 new infections, including in six previously unaffected provinces.

The head of a newly established cyber police unit announced the arrest of 24 people accused of online rumor-mongering about the spread of the virus.

They were handed over to the judiciary, while 118 other Internet users were briefly detained and received warnings, Vahid Majid said, cited by semi-official news agency ISNA.

The arrests were carried out after the establishment of a special unit to "combat rumor-mongers regarding the 'spread of coronavirus in the country'," he was quoted as saying.

"The police are monitoring all the news published in the country's

cyberspace.”

Majid said the unit would take action over news, pictures or videos that “contain rumors or fake news meant to disturb the public and increase concern in society.”

The ministry added that Markazi, Kermanshah, Ardebil, Mazandaran and Semnan provinces each had one new case.

Newly hit regions included southwestern Khuzestan, which reported three infections.

The others were Lorestan in the west, Semnan in northern central Iran and Kohgiluyeh and Boyerahmad, as well as in the southern provinces of Hormozgan and Sistan and Baluchistan, which all had two cases each.

The health ministry’s spokesman, Jahanpour, appeared optimistic about the situation in the worst-hit province of Qom, south of Tehran.

“Every 24 hours, at least 10 percent of those hospitalized or suspect cases are discharged with good general health,” the official said.

But in Gilan, “things are slightly concerning,” he added, as it has had the second highest number of new cases, including people who had made trips to other provinces.

The health minister has repeatedly called on Iranians to refrain from traveling to other provinces, especially those infected like Gilan.

Iran is yet to quarantine any of the infected cities, including Qom, with authorities dismissing the method as outdated and ineffective.



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## [US targets Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia active in Iraq](#)

Wed, 2020-02-26 23:17

WASHINGTON: The US on Wednesday blacklisted a senior member of Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia, punishing it for its attacks targeting US forces, most recently for killing an American contractor in an Iraqi military base near the northern city of Kirkuk.

The US State Department said it has designated Ahmad Al-Hamidawi as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), Secretary General of Kataib Hezbollah (KH), an Iran-backed terrorist group active in Iraq and Syria, which Washington designated as terrorist organization in 2009.

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"The Kataib Hezbollah group continues to present a threat to U.S. forces in Iraq," Nathan Sales, the State Department's counterterrorism coordinator, said at a news briefing. "We're adding to the pressure that has existed on this group for a decade."

Washington has blamed Iran-backed paramilitary groups for increasingly regular rocketing and shelling of bases hosting US forces in Iraq and of the area around the US Embassy in Baghdad.

An attack last month hit the US Embassy compound itself, and a rocket attack on a military base in the north in December killed a US civilian contractor. This triggered a string of events resulting in with the US killing the top Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a drone strike in Baghdad last month.



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