

Protests in Lebanon after move to tax calls on messaging apps

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Thu, 2019-10-17 19:52

BEIRUT: Hundreds of people took to the streets across Lebanon on Thursday to protest dire economic conditions after a government decision to tax calls made on messaging applications sparked widespread outrage.

Demonstrations erupted in the capital Beirut, in its southern suburbs, in the southern city of Sidon, in the northern city of Tripoli and in the Bekaa Valley, the state-run National News Agency reported.

Across the country, demonstrators chanted the popular refrain of the 2011 Arab Spring protests: "The people demand the fall of the regime."

Protesters in the capital blocked the road to the airport with burning tires, while others massed near the interior ministry in central Beirut, NNA said. "We elected them and we will remove them from power," one protester told a local TV station.

Public anger has simmered since parliament passed an austerity budget in July, with the aim of trimming the country's ballooning deficit.

The situation worsened last month after banks and money exchange houses rationed dollar sales, sparking fears of a currency devaluation.

The government is assessing a series of further belt-tightening measures it hopes will rescue the country's ailing economy and secure \$11 billion in aid pledged by international donors last year.

And it is expected to announce a series of additional tax hikes in the coming months as part of next year's budget.

On Wednesday, the government approved tax hikes on tobacco products.

Earlier on Thursday, Information Minister Jamal Jarrah announced a 20 cent daily fee for messaging app users who made calls on platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber – a move meant to boost the cash-strapped state's revenues.

The decision approved by cabinet on Wednesday will go into effect on January 1, 2020, he told reporters after a cabinet session, adding that the move will bring \$200 million annually into the government's coffers.

Lebanese digital rights group SMEX said the country's main mobile operators are already planning to introduce new technology that will allow them to detect whether users are trying to make Internet calls using their networks. "Lebanon already has some of the highest mobile prices in the region," SMEX said on Twitter.

The latest policy "will force users to pay for Internet services twice," it added.

TechGeek365, another digital rights group, said it contacted WhatsApp and Facebook regarding the matter.

"A spokesperson mentioned that if the decision is taken, it would be a direct violation of their ToS (terms of service)," it said.

“Profiting from any specific functionality within WhatsApp is illegal,” it added on Twitter.

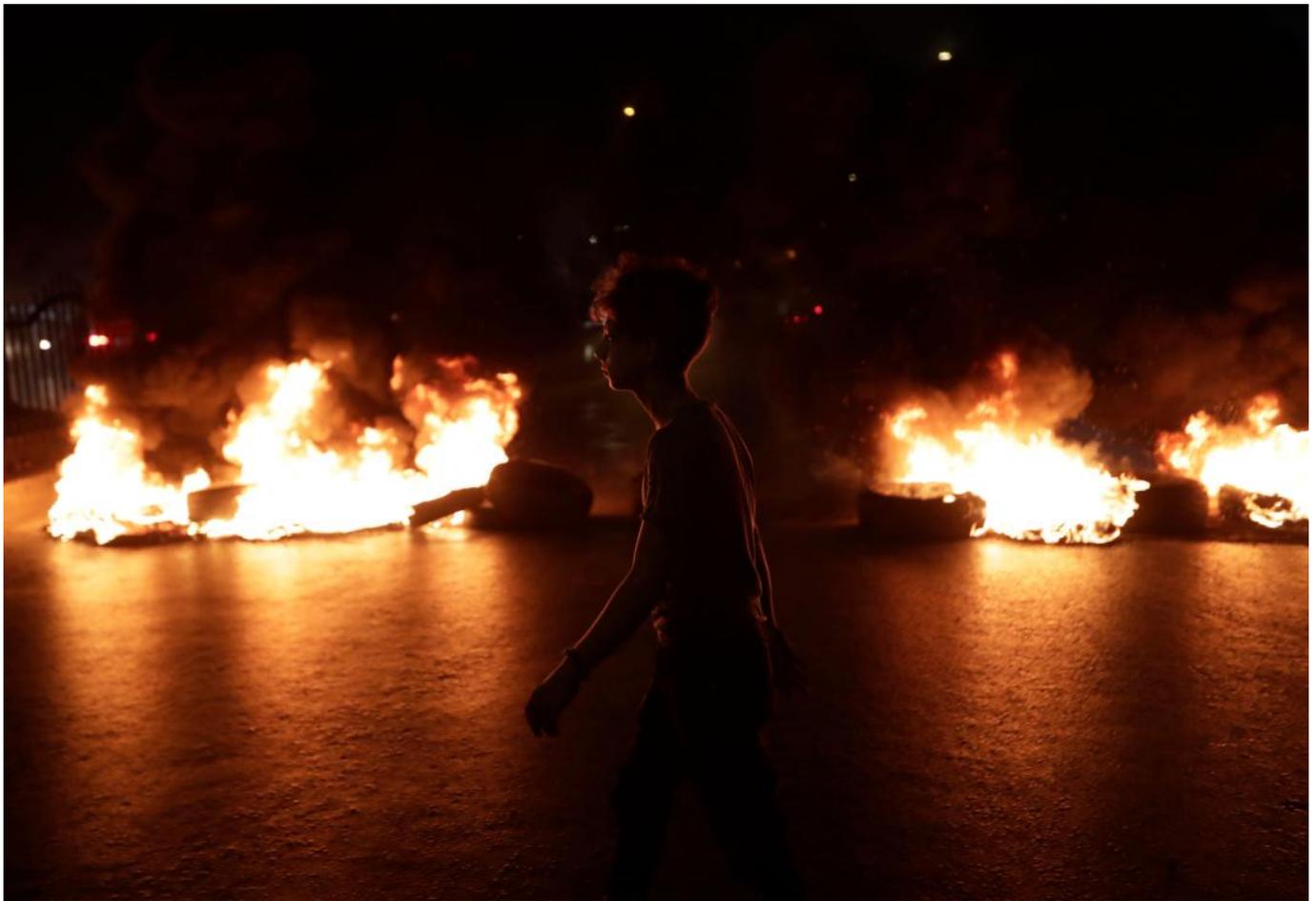
But SMEX said that the 20 cent fee would be “a condition of data plans” offered by mobile operators.

“Also, Facebook previously complied with a social media tax in Uganda, which is effectively the same thing,” it said on Twitter.

Growth in Lebanon has plummeted in the wake of repeated political deadlocks in recent years, compounded by the impact of eight years of war in neighboring Syria.

Lebanon’s public debt stands at around \$86 billion – higher than 150 percent of GDP – according to the finance ministry.

Eighty percent of that figure is owed to Lebanon’s central bank and local banks.





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Protests

Lebanon plans to charge for WhatsApp calls -minister
Lebanon's Nejmeh signs cooperation agreement with Arsenal

US reaches ceasefire deal with Turkey in northern Syria

Thu, 2019-10-17 20:39

ANKARA: Turkey agreed on Thursday to pause its offensive in Syria for five days to let Kurdish forces withdraw from a "safe zone" Ankara had sought to capture, in a deal hailed by Washington but which Turkish leaders cast as a complete victory.

The truce was announced by US Vice President Mike Pence after talks in Ankara with Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan, and was swiftly hailed by President Donald Trump, who said it would save "millions of lives."

.@VP: Today, the United States and Turkey have agreed to a ceasefire in Syria. pic.twitter.com/SXAsYq8Xnm

– Department of State (@StateDept) [October 17, 2019](#)

But if implemented it would achieve all the main objectives Turkey announced when it launched the assault eight days ago: control of a strip of Syria more than 30 kilometers deep, with the Kurdish YPG militia, formerly close US allies, obliged to pull out.

"The safe zone will be primarily enforced by the Turkish Armed Forces," a joint US-Turkish statement released after the talks said.

A Turkish official told Reuters Ankara got "exactly what we wanted" from the talks with the United States. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu described it as a pause, solely to allow the Kurdish fighters to withdraw.

This is a great day for civilization. I am proud of the United States for sticking by me in following a necessary, but somewhat unconventional, path. People have been trying to make this "Deal" for many years. Millions of lives will be saved. Congratulations to

ALL!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [October 17, 2019](#)

Kurdish fighters would be forced to give up their heavy weapons and their positions would be destroyed, Cavusoglu said. He declined to call the agreement a “cease-fire,” saying cease-fires could be agreed only by legitimate sides, and not by the Kurds that Turkey considers terrorists. Pence said Washington had already been in contact with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which had agreed to withdraw and were already pulling out.

Trump tweeted: “Great news out of Turkey.”

“Thank you to Erdogan,” Trump said. “Millions of lives will be saved!”

“Today the United States and Turkey have agreed to a cease-fire in Syria,”

Pence told a news conference after more than four hours of talks at the presidential palace in Ankara.

“The Turkish side will pause Operation Peace Spring in order to allow for the withdrawal of YPG forces from the safe zone for 120 hours,” Pence said. “All military operations under Operation Peace Spring will be paused, and Operation Peace Spring will be halted entirely on completion of the withdrawal.”

The deal struck with Erdogan also provided for Turkey not to engage in military operations in the flashpoint Syrian border town of Kobani, Pence said. Cavusoglu said Turkey had given no commitments about Kobani.

Pence added that he had spoken to Trump after the talks and that Trump had expressed his gratitude for the cease-fire accord. Washington’s main goal had been to halt the violence, and it had succeeded, Pence said.

The Turkish assault has created a new humanitarian crisis in Syria with 200,000 civilians taking flight, a security alert over thousands of Daesh fighters abandoned in Kurdish jails, and a political maelstrom at home for Trump.

Trump has been accused of abandoning Kurdish-led fighters, Washington’s main partners in the battle to dismantle Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate in Syria, by withdrawing troops from the border as Ankara launched its offensive on Oct. 9.

Trump had defended his move on Wednesday as “strategically brilliant.” He said he thought Pence and Erdogan would have a successful meeting, but warned of sanctions and tariffs that “will be devastating to Turkey’s economy” otherwise.



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Pence meets Erdogan to urge halt to Turkey's Syria offensive 'Don't be a fool!' Trump tells Erdogan as criticism grows for Syria withdrawal

[Iraqi blogger outspoken about country's corruption detained](#)

Author:

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA | AP

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1571328108018145500

Thu, 2019-10-17 14:18

BAGHDAD: A family member of a popular Iraqi blogger says authorities have detained him, apparently over his coverage of anti-government protests. The family member, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals,

said heavily armed masked gunmen stormed the apartment of Shujaa Al-Khafaji in Baghdad at dawn Thursday and took him away. Al-Khafaji, 29, runs a popular Facebook page called “Brothers Iraq” that focuses on human rights violations. On Tuesday the Facebook page, which has 2.1 million likes, posted a video that showed what it said were people setting a checkpoint on fire after the protesters had left. It blamed government supporters for the fire. The relative said Al-Khafaji received threats from unknown people in recent days warning him not to publish posts about the protests.



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Iran-backed militias deployed snipers during Iraq protests
Iran-backed militias deployed snipers during Iraq protests

Afghanistan suffers record 4,300 civilian casualties in three months – UN

Author:

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1571323862577671300

Thu, 2019-10-17 14:39

KABUL: A record 4,313 civilians were injured or killed in Afghanistan's war against the Islamist Taliban between July and September, the United Nations said on Thursday.

The tally was up 42 percent from the same period last year – in a war that ebbs and flows with the seasonal weather – and included more than a thousand deaths, according to data from the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

That made it the bloodiest period in the world's longest-running war since UNAMA began collecting like-for-like figures in 2009. It brought the total of casualties for the first nine months of 2019 to over 8,000.

"Civilian casualties at record-high levels clearly show the need for all parties concerned to pay much more attention to protecting the civilian population, including through a review of conduct during combat operations," said Tadamichi Yamamoto, one of the UN's top officials in Afghanistan.

Taliban insurgents fighting the US-backed Kabul government control more of Afghanistan than at any time since being ousted from power nearly two decades ago.

They have stepped up a campaign of suicide bombings in recent years as Washington tries to pull its forces out.

Around 62 percent of casualties were caused by what UNAMA called "anti-government elements," though casualties caused by pro-government forces also rose 26 percent.

UNAMA said on Tuesday that 85 civilians had been killed and more than 370 wounded in violence linked to last month's election.

The two presidential front-runners have both already claimed victory despite the count being delayed.



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Afghan official says car bomb wounds dozens of children in east

[‘Don’t be a fool’ Trump tells Erdogan in letter: World reacts](#)

Thu, 2019-10-17 17:49

LONDON: As a communication between two powerful heads of state, it didn’t exactly follow the usual protocol.

“Don’t be a fool” Donald Trump told Recep Tayyip Erdogan as he ended the three paragraph letter, which mixed threats to destroy the Turkish economy with lines out of a Hollywood action movie.

The extraordinary content of the note has sparked widespread reaction both at home and abroad as the US president faces a furore over his decision to

withdraw troops from north-eastern Syria.

1 of 1



THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

October 9, 2019

His Excellency
Recep Tayyip Erdogan
President of the Republic of Turkey
Ankara

Dear Mr. President:

Let's work out a good deal! You don't want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy—and I will. I've already given you a little sample with respect to Pastor Brunson.

I have worked hard to solve some of your problems. Don't let the world down. You can make a great deal. General Mazloun is willing to negotiate with you, and he is willing to make concessions that they would never have made in the past. I am confidentially enclosing a copy of his letter to me, just received.

History will look upon you favorably if you get this done the right and humane way. It will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don't happen. Don't be a tough guy. Don't be a fool!

I will call you later.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donald Trump", written in a cursive style.

The text of the letter was revealed on Wednesday evening as Trump was accused of giving Turkey the green light to launch an operation against Kurdish forces.

The letter was sent on Oct. 9 the day the incursion began.

“You don’t want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don’t want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy – and I will,” he wrote.

“History will look upon you favorably if you get this done the right and humane way,” Trump continued. “It will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don’t happen.”

“Don’t be a tough guy. Don’t be a fool!”

In Ankara, Erdogan “thoroughly rejected” the letter and “put it in the bin” Turkish presidential sources told BBC Turkish. Despite his anger at the tone, Erdogan went ahead with a meeting on Thursday with US Vice President Mike Pence.

This is insane. pic.twitter.com/ERHXoQGqUS

– Justin Amash (@justinamash) [October 16, 2019](#)

The Kremlin, which has troops alongside Syrian forces filling into some of the territory vacated by the US, questioned the tone of the letter.

“You don’t often encounter such language in correspondence between heads of state. It’s a highly unusual letter,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

At home the letter was seized upon by Trump’s rivals, and even mocked including within his own party. The letter emerged on Wednesday after Republicans joined Democrats in voting 354 to 60 in the House to condemn the decision to withdraw US forces.

“I actually thought it was a prank, a joke, that it couldn’t possibly come from the Oval Office,” the Democratic congressman Mike Quigley told CNN. “It sounds all the world like the president of the United States, in some sort of momentary lapse, just dictated angrily whatever was on the top of his head.”

Nervous Nancy’s unhinged meltdown! pic.twitter.com/RDeUI7sfe7

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [October 16, 2019](#)

However, Republican senator Lindsey Graham, who has criticized Trump for the withdrawal, said it was a “good letter” and had urged him to release it.

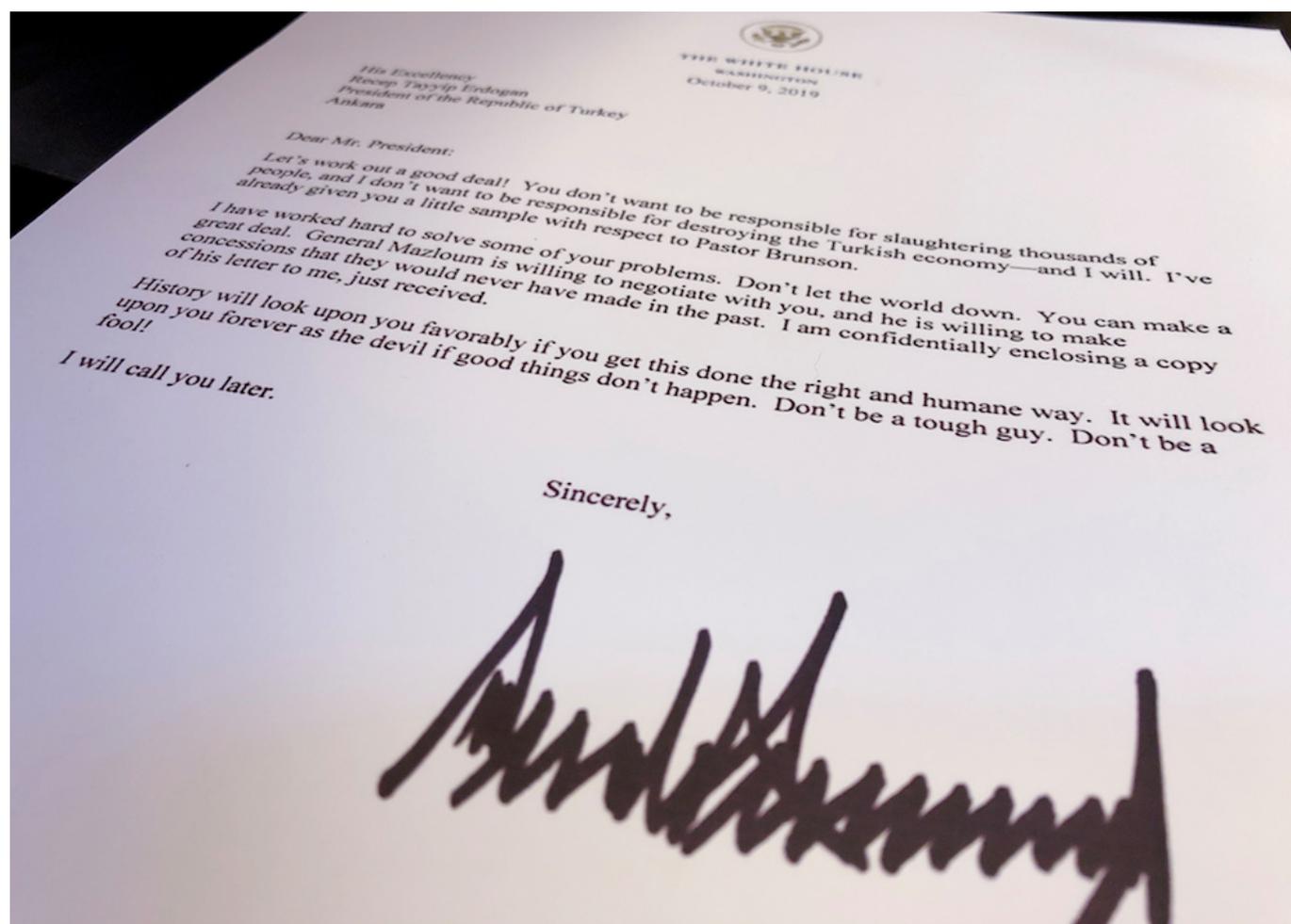
After the House vote, congressional leaders of both parties went to the White

House for a briefing, which grew contentious, with Trump and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi trading jabs. The Democrats said they walked out when the meeting descended into trading insults.

“What we witnessed on the part of the president was a meltdown,” Pelosi, D-Calif., told reporters, saying Trump appeared visibly “shaken up” over the House vote.

Stephanie Grisham, the White House press secretary, said that Mr Trump remained “measured and decisive” throughout the meeting. She tweeted: “Dem ‘leadership’ chose to storm out & whine to cameras.”

*With AP



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Trump Twitter photo attack backfires as Pelosi owns itUS lawmakers set measure opposing Trump on Syria troop withdrawal