

Lebanese celebrate Easter amid election campaign

Mon, 2022-04-18 00:09

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun has assured the Lebanese that parliamentary elections will be held and that all the arrangements are ready, as people celebrated Easter.

He took part in the Easter Mass, which was led by Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai in Bkerke.

Aoun said he hoped for “the resurrection” of Lebanon.

“We are living through a difficult tragedy in which problems have accumulated. I am experiencing the same situation you are and what befell you, befell me also.”

The president met Al-Rai before the Mass and then told the media: “We want better relations with Arab countries, and the return of ambassadors to Beirut is an important step in this direction.”

BACKGROUND

Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi urged people to vote in the upcoming elections because Lebanon ‘needs a national, sovereign and independent parliamentary majority.’

He hoped that the staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund would “positively affect” the situation in Lebanon and, speaking about the papal visit to Lebanon in June, wished “it would bring hope” to the country.

“Today, we live in the hope of the resurrection. As long as we are alive, we will not allow despair to get the best of us.”

Aoun also addressed the Shiite duo – the Amal movement and Hezbollah without naming them – and accused them once again of obstructing the work of the judicial investigation into the Beirut Port explosion.

“They are the same parties obstructing the Cabinet’s work, and you know who they are. The families of the martyrs should address their demands to them.”

The ministers of Hezbollah and the Amal movement boycotted Cabinet sessions last October amid their demands to dismiss the investigator into the explosion, Judge Tarek Bitar.

In mid-January, after paralyzing Bitar’s work and bombarding him with lawsuits, they started attending sessions again.

During his Easter sermon on Sunday, Al-Rai urged people to vote in the upcoming elections because Lebanon needed a "national, sovereign, independent" parliamentary majority that believed in a legitimate state, constitutional institutions, and the Lebanese army as a single reference for arms and security, as well as the unity of political and military decisions.

"If the people do not realize the seriousness of the situation and choose the forces capable of defending Lebanon's entity and identity, and restoring Lebanon's Arab and international relations, then the people, not the political system, will bear the responsibility for the great collapse. Lebanon is lucky that change can still be achieved democratically. The results of the elections depend on the Lebanese votes. There are no previously determined losers or winners.

"The greatest danger is misleading the people so that they elect a parliamentary majority that does not resemble them or meet their ambitions. The people, as they choose their representatives, should realize that they are also choosing the next president, and indeed the next republic. The fate of Lebanon depends on the quality of the parliamentary majority in the new parliament."

He also addressed Aoun: "The determination to hold the parliamentary elections, despite attempts to overthrow them, goes in line with securing the election of your successor. Everyone appreciates your efforts aimed at approving the general budget and agreeing on the recovery plan.

"The Lebanese do not want an alternative to the state, and they do not want a partner in the state. They yearn for the moment when foreign hands are lifted off of Lebanon. They yearn for the national interest to prevail over all personal and electoral interests. They yearn to have only one republic, one legitimacy, one weapon, one decision, and a comprehensive Lebanese identity.

"It is not permissible to change the identity of Lebanon's economic system, which is not subject to any constitutional settlement or political bargaining.

"Reforms need to be combined with extending the state's authority over its entire territory and unifying arms, per UN Security Council resolutions. It is imperative to respect the sovereignty of brotherly countries and stop campaigning against them."

Election campaigns intensified during the Easter holiday and the Shiite duo is seeking to win not only the entire Shiite share in the new parliament but secure a majority through candidates from other sects allied to them.

On Saturday, individuals affiliated with Hezbollah and the Amal movement attacked members of the Together for Change electoral list in one of the southern constituencies supported by the Communist Party, independents, and the civil movement in Tyre. They tried to prevent the members from reaching a restaurant in Sarafand to announce their list's electoral program.

Candidate Dr. Hisham Hayek said: "We tried to be in a democratic race and it

turned out that there was no democracy. We went to Sarafand, protected by the security forces, but we were surprised by organized gangs of young men who blocked the road and shot at us. How is this a fair competition? Does the announcement of an electoral program constitute a threat to civil peace?"

Candidate Ali Khalifeh said: "The message they wanted to send through violence is well received. They will not be tolerant of others' opinions, ideas, and programs that are committed to confronting the corrupt authority."

The Amal movement was quick to deny its connection to the attack, as did its parliamentary bloc, which condemned what happened and stressed the movement's keenness to achieve the electoral process in an "atmosphere of freedom and democratic competition."

The electoral list of Hezbollah and the Amal movement in the Baalbek-Hermel constituency tried to announce its electoral program in a ceremony in the heart of the historic Baalbek Citadel.

But civil society movements pressured the Minister of Culture Mohammed Mortada to stop this event due to its violation of the electoral law.

Article 77 states: "Public spaces, governmental departments, universities, faculties, institutes, public schools, and places of worship are not allowed to be used to hold electoral meetings or promotion."



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Palestinian families highlight plight of members in Israeli prisons
Clashes continue in Jerusalem as Jordanian king urges Israeli restraint

Palestinian families highlight plight of members in Israeli prisons

Sun, 2022-04-17 23:40

RAMALLAH: Palestinians mark Prisoners' Day on April 17 every year to highlight the plight of Palestinian political prisoners and detainees in Israeli prisons. This year a torch was lit in Jenin and Bethlehem on the evening of April 16, a march was organised in the centre of Ramallah, and schools talked in their classes about the status of prisoners.

Palestinians consider the prisoners to be freedom fighters who sacrificed their freedom to liberate their homeland, while Israel calls them terrorists. However, there is no Palestinian home or family that did not suffer at some point or have prisoners in the Israeli jails.

Since the beginning of the Israeli occupation in 1967, Israel has imprisoned more than 1 million Palestinians and continues to employ its policy of arbitrary mass detention through daily military raids and incursions. However, administrative detention is widely used to imprison Palestinians with no charge or trial for indefinite periods. Since 1967, Israeli authorities have issued more than 60,000 administrative detention orders.

According to Palestinian sources, there are currently 4,450 prisoners. Of these 160 are children, 32 are women, 20 are in solitary confinement, 600 are ill. There are 530 administrative detainees in Israeli jails.

Prisoners' Day comes amid an escalation of violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem for more than two weeks, as Israeli arrests of Palestinians continue.

The suffering of Palestinian families who have sons or daughters in Israeli prisons increases during Ramadan, as they are unable to visit them due to the time and distance of travel and long waits of more than 16 hours. Family members miss their captive children and relatives when they gather at the Ramadan dinner table.

Laila Zawahra, 70 years, the mother of prisoner Mohammed Zawahra, from Bethlehem, who is sentenced to life imprisonment, told Arab News that she

misses her son most during Ramadan.

"I remember him and miss him a lot when we eat Ramadan dinner every evening, whenever we cook the dish he loved, Mansaf and fried chicken, and when eating the Ramadan sweets Qatayef."

Zawahra says that she travelled from Bethlehem to Jerusalem on the first Friday of Ramadan to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque despite her poor health. She distributed the charity of Ramadan fasting on behalf of her son to the poor there, and called for his release during Friday prayers.

She remembered how Mohammed used to come at the end of the month of Ramadan and ask her about the gift she would like him to buy for her to mark the end of Ramadan.

She said that she will not be able to visit him during Ramadan while she is fasting, as the distance between her home in Bethlehem and Ashkelon Prison, where he is incarcerated, is long, and this may negatively affect her health. She visits her son once a month.

Bassam Darwish, the brother of Ghassan Darwish, 37, from Ramallah, who has spent 16 years in prison, described to Arab News the family's feelings during Ramadan: "The 16th of Ramadan passed, and Ghassan was not among us at the Ramadan dinner table, nor the suhoor, and he did not share the atmosphere of Ramadan with us."

He said that his family missed his brother Ghassan as he waited for the Maghrib call to announce the end of fasting.

Bassam said that when Ghassan was arrested, none of his brothers and sisters were married. Today Ghassan has 13 nephews and nieces but he has only seen them in photographs.

Before Ramadan, Ghassan asked family members not to visit him in his prison in Ketsaot in Negev, southern Israel, where the travel and waiting time is 16 hours. They have to travel from 7 in the morning and wait for long hours in scorching weather while the meeting with Ghassan is limited to 45 minutes. They can see him only through glass and talk to him through a telephone, while his father and older brother are prohibited from visiting him for security reasons.

"The Maqluba was Ghassan's favourite dish, and every time we cook this dish, we remember him so much," Bassam said.

To show respect for Palestinian prisoners, the PA Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh and Ramallah governor Leila Ghannam had a Ramadan dinner with Um Nasser Abu Humeid, who had 5 sons in Israeli jails.

"Prisoners are the conscience of the Palestinian people; they sacrificed their freedom to enable their people to live in freedom and dignity, and some of them have spent 42 years of their life in prison. There is no Palestinian family who has not lived and suffered from the experience of the arrest of one of its members," said Muqbil Al-Barghouti, the younger brother of the

prisoner Marwan Al-Barghouti, the Palestinian leader who has spent 20 years in prison under life imprisonment.



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Fires flare in Israeli prisons amid manhunt for 6 escapees
NGO says 4,500 Palestinians in Israeli prisons

[Hundreds rally against threat to close Turkish women's rights group](#)

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Sat, 2022-04-16 23:47

ANKARA: Hundreds of people demonstrated on Saturday in several Turkish cities including Istanbul and Ankara against a move to close one of the country's most respected women's rights groups.

"It is not possible to stop our fight. We are not going to allow the closure of our association," the secretary-general of We Will Stop Femicide, Fidan

Ataselim, told AFP.

An Istanbul prosecutor on Wednesday filed a lawsuit aimed at shutting down the association for "activity against law and morals."

According to Ataselim, the lawsuit accuses the group of conducting activities that violate Turkey's "laws and morals."

The association was a vocal critic of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision last year to pull Turkey out of the Istanbul Convention, which requires countries to set up laws aimed at preventing and prosecuting violence against women.

We Will Stop Femicide says 280 women were killed in Turkey last year, many of the murders committed by family members.

Another 217 women died in suspicious circumstances, including those officially registered as suicide, the group says.

Ataselim said the lawsuit was filed based on a complaint registered by a group of Turks through a website set up by the presidency to field citizens' requests.

The complaint accused the group of "destroying the family based on the pretext of defending women's rights," Ataselim said.

The language is similar to that used by Erdogan in his decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, which Turkey signed in 2011.

Social conservatives in Turkey claim the convention promotes homosexuality and threatens traditional family values.

"Don't prosecute women, but murderers!" Hundreds of demonstrators gathered in Istanbul shouted.

Representatives of opposition parties as well as relatives of domestic abuse victims took part in the demonstration.

"These women are fighters... I wanted to be there to support them," said Nihat Palandoken, the father of a young girl killed in 2017.



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[Palestinians fear more incursions after Friday's Israeli Al-Aqsa aggression](#)

Sat, 2022-04-16 19:16

RAMALLAH: Palestinians returned to the Al-Aqsa compound on Saturday following Friday's violent clashes between worshippers and Israeli forces, but tension and anxiety remain as extremist Jewish groups threaten to storm the mosque on Sunday.

Nabil Faydi, a political analyst from East Jerusalem, said Jerusalemites feared the temporal division of Al-Aqsa Mosque between Muslims and Jews as

happened at the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron.

But he added that it would be impossible for such a policy to succeed at Al-Aqsa.

"Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are a red line for the Palestinians," he told Arab News. "Israel is trying to separate the 350,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem from the Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and inside Israel. But recent events have proven that the Palestinians are united. It is a matter of Al-Aqsa Mosque."

He described Friday's attack as an Israeli "test balloon" to measure the Palestinian reaction. "But what happened in Al-Aqsa confirms that the Palestinians are ready to redeem the mosque with their lives. They will not allow the practice of Jewish rituals inside Islam's third holiest site."

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation condemned the Israelis' incursion into the sacred mosque and their assault on worshippers inside Al-Qibli Mosque and in Al-Aqsa plaza, which left over 150 worshippers injured and saw hundreds of others arrested.

"This dangerous escalation is an affront to the feelings of the entire Muslim Ummah and a blatant violation of international resolutions and instruments," the OIC said.

It held the Israeli occupation fully responsible "for the fallout of such daily crimes and offenses against the Palestinian people, their territories and sanctuaries."

It called on the international community, particularly the UN Security Council, to act against these constant violations.

Despite political differences among Palestinian groups – whether they are secular, Islamist, or Marxist – about the best method to adopt in their struggle against the Israeli occupation to liberate their land, the only thing that unites them is Al-Aqsa Mosque, which they consider a red line, not to be touched.

Ibrahim Al-Anbawi, a resident of East Jerusalem, described the situation as worsening and said there was intense anger among the Jerusalemites because of what had happened on Friday, which caused a great deal of embarrassment for Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

Both were accused of failing to protect Islamic holy sites, and they were urged to take strong positions on the Israeli threats.

Meanwhile, massive incursions will mark the week-long Jewish Passover into Al-Aqsa, which would keep the pot boiling, said Palestinian sources.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said: "The battle is not over and the resistance will not stop. There is no truce agreement with the criminal Israeli occupation, and it must stop its violations."

Dozens of students from Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, southeast of Jerusalem, suffered after inhaling tear gas fired by Israeli troops in and around their campus on Saturday. The students had gathered to condemn Israeli atrocities in Jerusalem and Jenin.

Roni Shakid, a senior researcher at the Truman Institute for Peace Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told Arab News: "As the Palestinians' dream of having an independent Palestinian state fades, the only thing they can fight for is protecting national symbols, and here Al-Aqsa Mosque stands out as the most important of those sacred symbols they believe they should protect and preserve."

Imad Mona, a bookstore owner in East Jerusalem, told Arab News that the merchants in the Old City and East Jerusalem were expecting more sales in Ramadan as the number of Al-Aqsa visitors from the Palestinians living in Israel, the West Bank, and even from East Jerusalem, was increasing.

But the prevailing tension and Israeli permit restrictions on West Bank residents during the Jewish holidays have limited the number of worshippers visiting the mosque.

Any security deterioration in Al-Aqsa Mosque will quickly cast a shadow over the situation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Last May, Hamas targeted Jerusalem and Tel Aviv with missiles following the Israeli authorities' attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque.

At the end of 2000, the Palestinians fought the Al-Aqsa second Intifada, which lasted nearly four years, during which about 4,464 Palestinians were killed, 47,440 were wounded, and 9,800 were arrested.

The violence began with a provocative visit to Al-Aqsa by former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.



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Clashes at Al-Aqsa draw regional, international condemnation
Saudi Arabia condemns Israeli raid over Al-Aqsa Mosque and attack on Palestinian worshippers

[Turkish envoy attracts attention with veiled criticism of Iran in article for Israeli think tank](#)

Author:

Sat, 2022-04-16 18:38

ANKARA: An article by Turkey's Ambassador to Washington for Tel Aviv

University's Dayan Center for Strategic Studies journal *Turkeyscope*, has raised questions about the state of Turkey's relations with Iran.

Apart from seeking cooperation between Turkey and Israel in fields of security and energy, Hasan Murat Mercan noted that the two states are under threat from similar regional malign actors, without mentioning Iran.

The article didn't go unnoticed by the Iranian media. The London-based TV station Iran International commenting on the article: "Ankara's envoy to Washington has called for Israeli-Turkish cooperation in countering regional threats, in a possible hint at Iran, amid improving bilateral ties."

The ambassador also underlined the need for cooperation against terrorism.

"Turkish-Israeli interaction offers more than a conventional regional partnership in the face of malign actors and trends. Conventional partnerships are for a particular issue, be it against a threat or for an objective. Conventional partnerships have expiration dates. Turkey and Israel, on the other hand, share a common neighborhood, heritage, and not least, a common future," he said in his article, which was entitled "Turkey and Israel: Optimism must prevail."

The ambassador continued: "Dealing with malign actors and their activities throughout our region is a particular area for enhanced coordination. The Turkish-Israeli partnership would be effective to further curb destabilizing moves in the broader Middle East and North Africa."

Israel and Turkey have always shared concerns over Iranian influence in Syria, with Iran's proxies, including Hezbollah and Shiite militias, threatening Turkish interests.

Ambassador Mercan, a figure close to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and a founding member of the ruling Justice and Development Party, called for re-designing Turkish-Israeli relations toward mutual trust.

"Turkish and Israeli geostrategic interests dictate a close and multi-layered partnership. "There is no room for complacency for both countries when it comes to: (i) managing regional dynamics that contain, inter alia, (a)symmetrical security threats and challenges, (ii) the need to further secure and diversify energy supply routes, and (iii) promoting inter-cultural synergy as a bulwark against Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism and all sorts of hate crimes."

It is not the first time that Mercan has underlined Turkey's concerns about the Iranian threat to the region's security.

In a speech to Haaretz in 2008 as president of the Turkish parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Mercan said a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a threat to Turkey.

As part of bilateral moves to mend ties, Israeli President Isaac Herzog met Erdogan last month in Ankara. Erdogan recently said that Turkey and Israel can cooperate to carry Israeli natural gas to Europe.

"While there are fluctuations in Turkey-Iran relations, these countries know how to keep the relationship in certain contours," Gallia Lindenstrauss, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel, told Arab News.

"There is, however, Turkish frustration from the growing competition between the two in northern Iraq, as well as the continuing competition in Syria," she added.

Several acts of espionage by Iranian agents against Israelis and Iranian dissidents on Turkish soil were recently revealed and thwarted by Turkish intelligence agencies.

Since last year, Turkish security forces increased their operations against the Iranian espionage network in the country.

After detaining Iranian spies over a plot to kidnap a former Iranian soldier last October, other spies were also arrested in February before they carried out a plan to kill Turkish-Israeli businessman Yair Galler.

On the energy front, Iran also halted gas flow to Turkey for 10 days in January.

Lindenstrauss said that cases such as the revelation of Iranian spies and the temporary halt of gas supply in the winter also increase tensions.

"Also, one cannot overlook the fact that Turkey is getting closer to the Arab Gulf states – mostly out of economic necessity – which also makes it less tolerant of Iranian attempts to increase its regional influence," she said.

Despite being part of the Syria-focused Astana peace talks with Iran and Russia, Ankara mostly shares a common perception with Gulf countries of Iran as a threat.

However, Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish program at the Washington Institute, said that Turkey has always separated its relations with Iran from its rapprochement process with Israel.

"Turkey has had competitive relations with Iran in the region. They see each other as two large 'former imperial' but 'currently hegemonic' powers that have the right to shape regional developments," he told Arab News.

"Throughout history, both countries avoided direct clashes despite coming very close to conflict in Syria with Turkish troops on one hand and Hezbollah and Iranian proxies on the other coming at close fire range."

According to Cagaptay, the normalization of ties between Turkey and Israel will first include energy cooperation.

The US government has repeatedly suggested the establishment of alternative pipelines from Israel to Greece passing through Turkey amid sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine that threaten severe shortages across Europe.

“At this stage, Turkey and Israel have similar objectives in Syria. They both have right of passage agreements, which allow Israel to strike Hezbollah and Turkey to strike the Kurdistan Workers’ Party,” he said.

In the meantime, Turkish state-run media channel TRT World recently published an article about whether the Ukraine fallout may lead to Iran gaining the upper hand over Russia in Syria.

“Tehran is trying to take advantage of the Ukraine crisis and strengthen its own position in the Syrian arena. Soon after Russia attacked Ukraine in late February, Iran and the Syrian regime increased their strategic engagement by increasing military diplomacy,” the article said. “At the same time, pro-Iranian fighters are working on relocating to different parts of Syria.”



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Iran's Quds Force vows to continue 'leading' militias across region
New Iran underground nuclear workshop