

# Rival Libyan premier says he plans to be in Tripoli in days

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ID:

1646928589724253200

Thu, 2022-03-10 19:14

TOBRUK, Libya: A rival Libyan prime minister says he plans to be in the country's capital and seat his government there in a matter of days – even though a parallel administration opposing his is currently located in Tripoli.

Fathi Bashagha expressed his belief that the war-torn country could be unified without more fighting and that his government will focus on holding elections soon, the only way out of Libya's decade-old conflict.

However, his statement is likely to add to fears that Libya's two rival administrations are heading into a deeper confrontation and that the divisions signal a return to civil strife after more than a year of relative calm. On Thursday, the United Nations and the United States urged restraint and expressed concern over reports of armed groups deploying in and around Tripoli.

"The sole political solution in Libya is to hold presidential and parliamentary elections," Bashagha said in an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday in the eastern city of Tobruk.

A former air force pilot and businessman, Bashagha was named prime minister last month by the House of Representatives, which has been based in Tobruk. The lawmakers selected Bashagha to replace embattled Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, who is based in Tripoli, claiming Dbeibah's mandate had expired after Libya failed to hold its first presidential elections in December.

The failure to hold the vote, which was scheduled for December 2021 under a UN-led reconciliation effort, was a major blow to concerted international efforts to bring peace to the oil-rich North African nation. Bashagha's appointment increased tensions and raised the possibility of renewed fighting in a country largely ruled by lawless militias and armed groups with conflicting interests.

Libya has been wrecked by chaos since a NATO-backed uprising toppled then killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. For years, it has been split between rival administrations in the east and the west, each supported by an array of militias and foreign governments.

Dbeibah has refused to step down and insists he will hand over power only to an elected government. He has sought to rally the international community by proposing a roadmap for parliamentary elections in June.

Appointed himself by a UN-led process in March of 2021, Dbeibah has called the push to replace his government "reckless" and a "farce" orchestrated by the political class hanging on to power, saying it could lead to more war. He mobilized allied militias in the capital and has closed its airspace to domestic flights in an apparent move to prevent Bashagha and his government

from landing there.

Bashagha ruled out the possibility of a return to violence, saying that efforts were ongoing to find a peaceful settlement to the stalemate and allow his government to work from the capital. He did not elaborate on why he expects to be in Tripoli soon.

"There will be no disputes, no civil wars. This situation (infighting) will not return again," Bashagha said. "We will be in Tripoli in the coming two or three days."

Both prime ministers hail from the western city of Misrata, which played a major role in the Qaddafi's overthrow and numerous bouts of civil fighting over the past decade, most recently in repelling a 2019 offensive on Tripoli by forces of east-based commander Khalifa Haftar.

The offensive failed after 14 months and an internationally brokered October 2020 cease-fire has kept a relative peace since. But long-running mistrust between eastern and western Libya remains.

Bashagha, who is also a former interior minister, has positioned himself as one of the most powerful figures in western Libya. He cultivated ties with Turkey, France and the United States, but also with Egypt and Russia – his nominal rivals during Haftar's campaign to capture Tripoli.

In recent months, he has grown an alliance with Haftar, something Bashagha has defended, saying that establishing ties with the powerful, but polarizing commander will help unify the country and spare it from sliding once again into war.

"For the first time, there is a true rapprochement between the east and west," he told the AP. "This is a good step."

Holding elections in Libya still faces many deep-rooted and unresolved challenges, including controversial candidates and disputed laws governing elections, as well as deep mistrust between rival factions.

Meanwhile, at least three ministers resigned Thursday from Dbeibah's Cabinet, citing their respect for the east-based parliament's appointment of Bashaga. In videos on social media, the ministers of social services, migration and human rights said they were ready to hand over their portfolios in order to spare Libyans further divisions.



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## [Houthi bomb-maker killed in northern Yemen clashes](#)

Thu, 2022-03-10 16:50

AL-MUKALLA: A Houthi bomb-maker described as one of the militia's "most dangerous leaders" has been killed in fierce clashes in Yemen's northern province of Hajjah, officials and media reports said.

Abdul Aziz Ahmed Al-Abed, a mechanical engineer known for making bombs and preparing locally made land mines, was among a number of Houthi fighters who died in fighting in Hajjah's Haradh district.

Nasser Dagin, a pro-government deputy governor of Hajjah, described Al-Abed, who was born in the province, as "one of the most dangerous leaders," and said he was responsible for manufacturing land mines, IEDs and bombs that claimed the lives of thousands of Yemenis.

Houthi mourners claimed that Al-Abed had taken part in many rounds of fighting between the movement and its opponents in Amran, Saada and Abyan over the past decade, and was among the fighters who stormed the Yemeni capital Sanaa in late 2014.

Yemeni officials believe that the Houthis have planted more than 1 million mines across the country, mainly in the battlefields in Jouf, Hodeidah, Marib and Shabwa.

Al-Abed's death is a major blow to the Houthi militia, which has lost thousands of fighters, including high-ranking military leaders, in clashes with Yemeni government troops and the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen.

Houthi casualties have surged since the beginning of the year, when government troops, backed by coalition air cover and military logistics, launched an offensive to take control of Haradh district.

Funeral processions for dozens of Houthi fighters killed in action take place almost every day.

Al-Abed was killed as heavy fighting between government troops and the Houthis raged in the provinces of Marib and Hajjah.

Yemen's Defense Ministry said that army troops killed a number of Houthis fighters in the battle for a military location west of Marib.

Another group of Houthi fighters was reportedly killed during the army's shelling of Al-Faleha, south of Marib.

Official media also said that the army's heavy weapons, together with coalition warplanes, struck Houthi-controlled areas in Haradh.



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[Abdul Aziz Ahmed Al-Abed](#)

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## [Two Hezbollah members guilty of 2005 Hariri slaying on appeal: UN tribunal](#)

Thu, 2022-03-10 16:30

THE HAGUE: A UN-backed tribunal on Thursday found two Hezbollah members guilty on appeal for the 2005 death of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, saying both were involved in the bombing that killed him. Appeals judges at the Netherlands-based court said trial judges "erred" in 2020 by acquitting the two men, together with a third, in finding that there was a lack of evidence.

Set up in 2009 to try those responsible for the bombing that killed Hariri and 21 others, the court convicted Salim Ayyash, a member of the Lebanese

Shiite Muslim movement Hezbollah.

But they acquitted Hassan Habib Merhi, Hussein Oneissi and Assad Sabra, saying there was not enough evidence to convict them.

Appeals judges granted an appeal by prosecutors, who asked that the acquittals be overturned for Merhi and Oneissi.

"The appeals chamber has unanimously decided to reverse the acquittals of misters Merhi and Oneissi. We unanimously find Mr. Merhi and Oneissi guilty," presiding judge Ivana Hrdlickova said.

"The appeals chamber will issue arrest warrants for them later this afternoon," she added.

All four men were tried in absentia over the February 2005 attack, when a suicide bomber detonated a van full of explosives as Hariri's armored convoy passed on the Beirut waterfront.

The case against all four men relied almost exclusively on circumstantial evidence in the form of mobile phone records that prosecutors said showed a Hezbollah cell plotting the attack.

Hassan Nasrallah, the head of the Hezbollah movement, refused to hand over any of the suspects or to recognize the UN-backed court, which has issued an international warrant for the arrest of Ayyash.

The court said in April last year that Ayyash cannot appeal against the verdict until he turns himself in.

The Lebanon tribunal is expected to close after the appeals phase because of a cash shortage, with a further case against Ayyash over attacks on several politicians likely to go unheard.



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## [Lebanon central bank seeks names of those who failed to repatriate funds amid crisis](#)

Author:

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1646852655666328200

Wed, 2022-03-09 22:11

BEIRUT: Lebanon's central bank has asked commercial banks to provide the names of political figures who failed to comply with a circular ordering them to repatriate funds sent abroad in the lead-up to the country's 2019 financial meltdown.

Lebanon's financial crisis, which the World Bank has labelled one of the deepest depressions of modern history, has been compounded by political deadlock and a row over the probe into the 2020 Beirut port blast that killed more than 200 people.

The central bank, known as the Banque du Liban (BDL), said banks must provide its Special Investigation Commission with the names by the end of March, adding that "cash deposits made between July 2017 and end-December 2020 are concerned as well, if the beneficiary is" a politically exposed person. Last week, a US Treasury delegation urged Lebanon to investigate what it described as "abuses" within the banking system by members of the political and economic elite.

Allegations of financial misconduct have been widespread following the financial collapse, when banks imposed tight controls on hard currency accounts for most savers but critics say some people with influence were able to access funds more freely.

Banks have denied claims of favoritism toward certain clients, and say they have consistently called on the government to introduce a capital control law to regulate the sector – something the government has failed to do.

Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh faces corruption probes in a number of European countries and in Lebanon, where officials are investigating alleged money laundering and embezzlement of central bank funds. He has denied wrongdoing.



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## [Will the debate over 'mega centers' delay Lebanon's parliamentary elections?](#)

Author:

Wed, 2022-03-09 21:04

BEIRUT: The Lebanese government is expected to make a decision on Thursday on whether to set up so-called mega centers to make it easier for people to vote in the country's upcoming parliamentary elections.

The aim of the facilities, which are favored by President Michel Aoun, is to allow voters to cast their ballots outside their area of registration, meaning they would not have to return to their hometowns to do so.

However, it has been suggested that if the centers are created it could lead to the elections, currently scheduled for May 15, being delayed.

After a ministerial committee completed a report into the issue, the Cabinet must now decide how to proceed based on its findings. If it approves the idea, a draft law would have to be submitted to parliament to allow the centers to be created.

While Aoun's camp said that "no legal measures were necessary to adopt the mega centers. It is very easy if the political intent is there," the opposition said that "the issue requires legal amendments and will result in a very high financial cost."

In the committee's report, Tourism Minister Walid Nassar said: "The cost of establishing eight mega centers ... does not exceed \$2 million and they can be completed in no more than three weeks."

But Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said the technical requirements of setting up the facilities would lead to disruption.

"The ministerial committee is against postponing the elections and insists on holding them on the designated date without any delay," he said.

The disruption would be caused by the need for the centers to have the "necessary principles and requirements in order to have a sound election," he said.

"It is not a tent that can be set up in neighborhoods with a ballot box on top of a table. It is way more complicated.

"Mega centers without electronic connection, fiber optics and a central server that provides the necessary linkage are not actual mega centers, unless they want them to be like tents."

He added: "The company that will be in charge of this project will need up to three months to complete the task and link the main electoral centers to the mother server. Moreover, what applies to the Lebanese voters living outside the country should apply to voters residing in the country."

Political observers said that the insistence of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement to establish mega centers aimed to "impose the extension of the current parliament's mandate so that this same parliament elects the next president in the framework of a certain settlement."

The presidential elections are set to take place in October.

But the FPM said its call for the establishment of mega centers was made in response to the change in circumstances since the 2018 elections.

"This is due to the significant economic collapse the country has been suffering from since 2019 and because it would be difficult for voters to go to their villages due to the high cost of transportation," it said.

The huge spike in the price of gasoline – to close to 500,000 Lebanese pounds (\$330) a gallon – meant that the centers would save the Lebanese people billions of lira, the FPM said.

"In addition, the mega centers help free the voters of numerous restrictions, raise the participation rate and promote the legitimacy of the electoral process," it said.

The FPM is concerned that the high cost of traveling home to vote will deter many people from doing so. But political observers said that other political parties, especially Hezbollah and Amal Movement, are opposed to the idea of the mega centers as it could dilute the influence they hold in small villages and towns.

Other observers said that the FPM might be deliberately seeking to delay the polls to give it a greater chance of winning more parliamentary seats in certain regions.

"The aim could be even bigger than that. It could be seeking to create a parliamentary vacuum in order to disrupt the next presidential elections," one observer said. "That way, Aoun remains the president to run the affairs of the state."

MP Mohammad Hajjar, from the Future Parliamentary Bloc that represents the Sunni majority in parliament, told Arab News that if parliament decided to extend its mandate, the bloc's MPs would resign.

"This decision has been taken and is irreversible. As for the postponement of the elections, that is a different story. We insist on holding the parliamentary elections on time. However, if an unexpected event occurs, that is a different matter."



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