

Lebanon's President Aoun reiterates support for impartial central bank audit

Author:

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BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun on Thursday stressed that “the financial criminal audit of Banque du Liban (the country’s central bank) should reach practical results, while steering clear of personal interests.”

During a speech on Thursday to the recently formed National Anti-Corruption Commission, Aoun said the Lebanese people “have the right to know where their life savings went. Any party that says otherwise has certainly benefited from the wrong practices in managing the affairs of the state and its institutions, especially BDL. These parties are waging campaigns against me and continue to mislead public opinion.”

Judge Ghada Aoun, who is politically affiliated with the president, continues to insist that Riad Salameh, the governor of the bank, be prosecuted. On Wednesday, the judge decided to prosecute Maj. Gen. Imad Osman, head of the Internal Security Forces, for preventing officers from State Security from entering Salameh’s home in Rabieh on Tuesday.

The State Security officers were acting on a summons issued by Judge Aoun against Salameh after he failed to appear three times as a witness in a criminal case brought by the group The People Want to Reform the System over allegations of “unjust enrichment, money laundering and wasting public funds.”

The ISF’s General Directorate said: “The members in front of Salameh’s house have been stationed there for some time to protect him from any security threat and they are not authorized to interfere, report or prevent the implementation of any official memorandum. This was stressed during a call between Osman and the Director-General of State Security Maj. Gen. Tony Saliba as part of the continuous coordination between them.”

Observers see the ISF and State Security as having differing loyalties within Lebanon’s sectarian political system.

In April 2021, Judge Ghassan Oweidat, the public prosecutor, suspended Judge Aoun from cases related to major financial crimes and instead referred them to judicial inspection. Judge Aoun insisted on carrying on with her investigations, however, and issued a subpoena against Salameh as a witness, not a defendant. His lawyers submitted a request to dismiss Judge Aoun from the case but she refused to step down.

According to a BDL source quoted by Reuters: “Salameh is working normally from his office.”

Judge Aoun accused the security services of being "an accomplice" and added that she has the right "to punish any employee seeking to violate the rule of law."

Her decision to take action against ISF chief Osman had political repercussions. MP Bahia Hariri, head of the Future Movement bloc, raised concerns with Prime Minister Najib Mikati. He assured her, according to a statement issued by his office, that he is "against Judge Aoun's actions," and said that Osman had correctly performed all his duties in complete coordination with the prime minister and the minister of interior.

Mikati added that the allegation against Osman "is pure slander and completely false." He said he will take up the issue with Judge Oweidat and the justice minister to end "this persistence in attacking state institutions, their prestige and the dignity of those in charge of them."

Hariri condemned "this suspicious silence on the part of judicial supervisory bodies regarding the legal violations committed by Judge Aoun in the name of the law, only to serve political goals and personal whims."

President Aoun, meanwhile, criticized "incitement campaigns and false allegations by the Future Movement and those who go along with it."

His media office said that the president will continue to demand answers about "the fate of \$69 billion lost out of the \$86 billion deposited by Lebanese banks in BDL, knowing that what the Lebanese state borrowed in foreign currencies from BDL did not exceed \$5 billion."

Economics expert Jassem Ajaka said there are several dimensions to the situation with Salameh.

"Should foreign banks find that there are legal risks in dealing with Lebanon, the BDL accounts may be closed," he said. "This would have negative repercussions on imports and if the dollar exchange rate is affected, the budget deficit would increase and thus impact negotiations with the International Monetary Fund."

"The monetary situation is directly related to Salameh, and the financial issue is indirectly related to him because the government that approved the budget needs him to ensure a stable exchange rate."



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Lebanon approves \$18 million to hold May election
Lebanon President Aoun promises central bank audit will provide accountability

[Iran-linked hacker group targets Turkey's cyber network](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-02-17 22:58

ANKARA: Iran has escalated its longstanding cyber campaign against Turkey through state-sponsored hackers, who have targeted high-profile governmental and private websites in the country since November 2021.

Experts believe that the upgraded cyber assault is a reaction against Turkey's attempts to normalize ties with countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

MuddyWater, a hacker group linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, is allegedly behind these cyber attacks, which involve infection

vectors such as malicious PDF attachments and Microsoft Office documents embedded in phishing emails.

These malicious documents were titled in the Turkish language so they would present as legitimate texts coming from the Turkish health and interior ministries.

The malware attack was first observed by CISCO Talos Intelligence Group, one of the world's biggest commercial threat-focused intelligence teams.

The emails to the target's enterprise contained a link to a compromised website and used the name of the target institution as a parameter in the URL.

As part of a tactic known as web bug, the links are used to track when the messages are opened by the endpoint.

When the initial access to the victim is gained, the hacker group collects sensitive information from its network.

MuddyWater is known for its attacks against government networks across the US, Europe, the Middle East and South Asia for the last two years, with the aim of conducting cyber-espionage for state interests, deploying ransomware and destructive malware and stealing intellectual property that has high economic value.

"Iran has become an increasingly capable and sophisticated cyber actor since 2007," Rich Outzen, a retired colonel in the US Army and senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, told Arab News.

"Up to that time, there were cyber attacks and cyber crime emanating from Iran, but little evidence of state direction," said Outzen.

"Starting with the suppression of the Green Movement and Iran's own experience as a target of cyber attacks on its sanctioned nuclear program, the emergence of an 'Iranian Cyber Army' under the guidance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has been documented," he said.

The group is mainly motivated by geopolitical events and designs its hacking attempts based on long-term strategic goals.

"Iran now regularly conducts data deletion attacks, Distributed Denial of Service attacks, and industrial disruption attacks against targets in the US, Europe, Israel and the Gulf, as well as against domestic targets in Iran," Outzen said.

"The attacks on Turkey have been less frequent, but appear to be increasing in the past two to three years. With the rapprochement underway with Israel and the Gulf, more can be expected," he said.

Last week, Turkey and Israel jointly foiled an Iran-led assassination attempt on a 75-year-old Israeli-Turkish businessman in Turkey after a lengthy intelligence operation that unveiled an Iranian cell.

The timing of the assassination attempt coincided with Turkey's discussions to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel, when President Isaac Herzog was set to visit the country soon.

It also came days before Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's planned visit to the UAE to boost ties and develop joint cooperation projects for the region.

This time, the hacker group's targets in Turkey included the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey.

"Iran uses cyber warfare as an extension of its foreign and security policies," Jason M. Brodsky, policy director of United Against Nuclear Iran, told Arab News.

"Iranian tactics include cyber espionage, cyberattacks and foreign influence operations," said Brodsky.

"Turkey has long been a target of Iranian cyber activity," he added.

"For instance in 2015, some reports traced a large power outage in Turkey to Iran. The US government has alleged that the Mabna Institute, which is an Iranian company that has on occasion contracted with Iranian governmental entities to conduct hacking operations, targeted universities in Turkey," Brodsky said.

Experts advise institutions in Turkey to assess the cyber threat, apply security updates to all their systems periodically, improve the preparedness of their networks against exposure to malicious activities, and develop up-to-date remote access solutions and web-based email access with multi-factor authentication.

Earlier this year, US Cyber Command attributed MuddyWater's activities to the MOIS, and it published some samples of malicious codes allegedly used by Iranian hackers to help US allies defending themselves from future intrusion attempts.

According to the US Congressional Research Service, the MOIS "conducts domestic surveillance to identify regime opponents. It also surveils anti-regime activists abroad through its network of agents placed in Iran's embassies."

Brodsky said that, in the current context, Iran's motives can be multifaceted for economic, intelligence and political reasons.

"Tehran has broadly been trying to extract a price from regional competitors who are in the process of improving or normalizing relationships with Israel, and such an uptick in Turkey would not be surprising," he said.

"That is not to mention that the cyber attacks could be related to Ankara's very public allegations of Iranian intelligence activity in the country, targeting dissidents and recently an Israeli businessman," he said.

According to Outzen, sanctions against countries that are allegedly behind these attacks are of limited use because the primary cyber actors of concern for the US and its allies – Russia, China and Iran – are already heavily sanctioned.

“The cyber collectives carrying out the attacks often operate at the direction of, but not formally as part of, state apparatus,” he said.

“Sanctions must be combined therefore with both a campaign of public awareness and cyber security practices that make targets harder to strike, and cyber operations by the US and its allies against the sources of the attacks,” he added.

Outzen added that this is an ongoing, low-level cyber war, which Turkey is now a part of.

“The key is to both protect (their) own assets, and to pose the malicious actors – in this case Iran – escalating costs for engaging in the attacks,” he said.

Ties between Turkey and Iran have recently fluctuated, with the countries pursuing an intense geopolitical rivalry in Syria’s northwestern Idlib province and northern Iraq, particularly the disputed Sinjar district.

Last week, Turkey and Israel jointly foiled an Iran-led assassination attempt on a 75-year-old Israeli-Turkish businessman in Turkey after a lengthy intelligence operation that unveiled an Iranian cell.

On Jan. 20, Iran abruptly cut natural gas flow to Turkey and the disruption lasted for about 10 days, undermining operations in factories.



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Turkey, Israel foil Iran-led assassination attempt on businessman in Istanbul
Cyber security jobs top list of fastest-growing roles in Saudi Arabia, LinkedIn study shows

[Abbas, US speaker Pelosi hold rare West Bank meeting](#)

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Thu, 2022-02-17 19:28

RAMALLAH: Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas met with US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in the Israeli-occupied West Bank Thursday for talks on reviving a two-state solution to the conflict, Abbas's office said.

It was one of the highest-level meetings with an American official in recent years for the 86-year-old Palestinian president.

Abbas urged US action on what he described as "unilateral Israeli practices" that "undermine a two-state solution."

Those included expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and moves to evict Palestinians from various parts of Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, which Palestinians claim as their future capital.

Relations between the US and the Palestinian Authority effectively collapsed during former president Donald Trump's administration, notably after Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's "undivided capital."

There have been a series of US outreaches to Abbas and the PA since President Joe Biden took office last year.

Palestinian opinion polls show that support for Abbas and the PA are at historic lows, especially after the aging president scrapped plans to hold elections last year.

Experts say Washington is keen to work with its staunch ally Israel to bolster the embattled PA, especially as a bulwark against Hamas, the extremist group that controls the Gaza strip.

Hamas is designated as a terrorist organization by much of the West.

Pelosi, who was leading a delegation of eight Democratic party lawmakers to the region, had previously met top Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Naftali Bennett earlier Thursday.

Bennett thanked her for her "ongoing support for Israel."

In talks with Israeli officials, Pelosi and the US delegation affirmed "America's ironclad commitment to the State of Israel," the speaker's office said in a statement.

"We repeatedly reaffirmed America's commitment to a just and enduring two-state solution that enhances stability and security for Israel, Palestinians and their neighbors."





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Iconic Gaza bookstore reopens, months after Israeli strike
Abbas loyalists win top jobs at embattled PLO

[Hamass TV series glorifies fight against Israel](#)

Thu, 2022-02-17 00:37

BEIT LAHIYA, Gaza Strip: The Palestinian militants scrambled out of the tunnel and attacked an Israeli tank in broad daylight as gunfire and explosions echoed across the Gaza frontier.

This time it wasn't the start of another war, but an action scene filmed for a TV series produced by the territory's militant Hamas rulers.

The 30-episode series, titled "Fist of the Free," presents the fighters as scrappy heroes outwitting a better-armed Israeli military. Unlike "Fauda," the hit Israeli drama that deals with some of the same subject matter, it is unlikely to get picked up by Netflix.

It's the latest such production by the media arm of Hamas, which has invested heavily in its offerings despite a crippling Israeli blockade on Gaza since the militant group seized power in 2007.

The shows are aired on Hamas-run TV, and "Fist of the Free" will debut during the upcoming holy month of Ramadan, when viewership soars after the dawn-to-dusk fast and networks across the Muslim world debut big-budget offerings.



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Gaza TV studio produces Hamas response to Israeli hit shows
Four killed in shooting at Palestinian camp in Lebanon, Hamas says

Surprise ruling threatens wedge between Iraq and Kurdish govts

Thu, 2022-02-17 00:20

BAGHDAD: A surprise ruling by Iraq's high court cast doubt on the legal foundations of the independent oil policy of Iraq's Kurdish-run region and threatened to drive a political wedge between the two governments, officials warned Wednesday.

Iraq's Supreme Court on Tuesday struck down the legal justifications for the semi-autonomous region's oil policy, effectively calling into question the future of the region's oil contracts, exports and revenues.

The ruling comes during a politically sensitive time, as efforts have stalled in Iraq to form a government.

"At a time when Iraq is passing through a turbulent political period, it is unfortunate that the ruling of the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq deems the Kurdistan Region's oil and gas law unconstitutional, causing the Kurdistan region great concern," said region President Nechirvan Barzani on Wednesday.

The ruling "will further exacerbate the disputes between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government on the issues of oil and gas," he said.

Last week, Iraq's Supreme Court barred the presidential candidate from the Kurdistan Democratic Party – the Kurdish-region's main ruling party – from running for the post.

HIGHLIGHT

Iraq's Supreme Court on Tuesday struck down the legal justifications for the semi-autonomous region's oil policy, effectively calling into question the future of the region's oil contracts, exports and revenues.

The court ruled that Hoshiyar Zebari was not eligible to run amid corruption allegations. It was a blow to populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr, the biggest winner in the October election, who vowed to speedily push through a new government excluding Iran-backed parties.

Under Iraq's governing system adopted in 2005, the prime minister must be a Shiite, the speaker a Sunni and the presidency held by a Kurd. The process to select candidates is typically set back by political deadlock.

It was not immediately known why the ruling, which comes after nearly a decade of delays, came this week.

Tuesday's decision cast into doubt the future of the region's main revenue source.

The region averaged \$750 million per month in oil exports via Turkey in 2021, according to Iraq Oil Report. The region also relies on budget transfers from Baghdad to pay for salaries and debts to traders.

The Kurdish region said the ruling itself was "unjust, unconstitutional" and "unacceptable" in a statement. The region has historically relied on the absence of a federal oil and gas law to justify its independent oil policy.

Iraq's constitution says regions and provinces can have a modicum of independence over oil but that the specifics should be spelled out in a separate law. Such a law has never been passed.

Baghdad filed a lawsuit challenging the region's claims in 2012. The case was suspended in the last known hearing in September 2019 after the judge requested that then-Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi sign off on continuing the legal battle.



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