

Fears grow over Iran influence in Lebanon after Hezbollah, Amal Cabinet decision

Sun, 2022-01-16 23:02

BEIRUT: A decision by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement to end a boycott of Lebanon's Cabinet has led to speculation that Iran is making moves to control Lebanon's political system.

Lebanese Forces MP Ziad Hawat said: "The order came from Tehran, so the 'disruption duo' decided to set the Cabinet meetings free. These are the repercussions of external negotiations."

He added: "The 'disruption duo' pawned the country to the outside will. But the parliamentary elections are coming and the hour of reckoning is upon us."

The two parties said on Saturday that they would take part in Cabinet meetings after a three-month boycott.

The decision came as a surprise to many, and positively impacted the currency rate on Sunday.

Reacting to the announcement, Prime Minister Najib Mikati said that he would convene a Cabinet meeting as soon as the Finance Ministry had sent through a draft budget.

He added that the decision "aligns with his personal repeated calls for everyone to participate in assuming the national responsibility in a way that preserves the national pact, especially during these critical times the country is going through."

Mikati's office noted the need "to set a recovery plan to launch the negotiation process with the International Monetary Fund."

Some political observers said that the two parties are facing a political stalemate and popular pressure accusing them of escalating crises.

Parliamentary elections are around the corner and the two parties "want to absorb people's resentment before the date of the said elections next May."

Other observers linked the decision by the two parties to "regional developments regarding the Vienna talks."

They believe that "the decision to disrupt the Cabinet meetings served an external agenda, specifically an Iranian one, and that perhaps they ended their boycott to demonstrate flexibility in the complicated negotiations."

The two parties said in their joint statement on Saturday: "We announce our agreement to participate in Cabinet meetings to approve the national budget

and discuss the economic rescue plan, and all that concerns improving the living conditions of the Lebanese.”

They claimed that the decision came “following the acceleration of events and the escalation of the internal political and economic crisis to an unprecedented level, with the collapse of the Lebanese pound’s exchange rate, the decline of the public sector and the collapse of citizen income and purchasing power.”

Hezbollah and Amal also mentioned in their mutual statement that their boycott was due to “the unconstitutional steps undertaken by Judge Tarek Bitar in the Beirut Port blast case – the gross legal infringements, flagrant politicization, lack of justice and lack of respect for standardization.”

Instead of Bitar presiding over the case, the two parties have requested that a parliamentary panel should look into the matter.

This requirement, however, has not been executed yet, as the prime minister has refused to “interfere with judicial operations,” with his party firmly backing Bitar.

Phalanges Party MP Samy Gemayel said that Hezbollah and Amal “think they owe us a favor by ending the boycott.”

He added: “They paralyzed the country for a year to form the government they wanted and they boycotted it to prevent justice from prevailing in the ‘crime of the century.’

“The Lebanese people are the ones paying the price. There’s no work, no electricity, no heating, no bread and no medicine,” said Gemayel.

He added: “Accountability for humiliating people will be achieved through the elections.”

In his Sunday sermon, Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi commented on the latest development regarding Cabinet sessions.

“In the democratic system, the procedural authority shall operate according to the powers conferred upon it by the constitution, without being subject to any illegal pressure or condition,” he said.

He warned against “resorting to the disruption of parliamentary and presidential elections – scheduled for next October – for suspicious personal objectives.

“The Cabinet disruption, the political escalation, the continued provocation, the use of justice to undermine the opponents and the inversion of priorities reassure neither the Lebanese people nor Lebanon’s brothers and friends.”

Internet services were disrupted in Lebanon on Sunday because of diesel shortages, adding another essential service to the list of casualties of the country’s economic crisis.

The Energy Ministry, however, categorically denied an Israeli Channel 12 report entitled “Washington approves an agreement to supply Lebanon with Israeli gas.”

The ministry said that “the gas supply agreement between the Lebanese government and the Egyptian government clearly states that the gas must come from Egypt, which owns large gas quantities.

“This gas will pass through Jordan, and then into Syria, which will in turn benefit from it.”



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[US and France discuss ways to promote Libya's democratic process](#)

Sun, 2022-01-16 19:28

LONDON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held talks with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian to discuss efforts to promote the democratic process in Libya, the State Department said on Sunday.

Efforts to lead Libya into elections at the end of December were thrown into disarray when the country's electoral commission said a vote could not take place, citing what it called inadequacies in the electoral legislation and the judicial appeals process.

Blinken also spoke about the recent informal EU foreign ministers' meeting, that was held in the western French city of Brest on Friday as part of the French presidency of the Council of the EU.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian had reiterated following the meeting on Friday his view that talks to revive a 2015 Iran nuclear deal are progressing "much too slowly to be able to reach a result."

"We now have to conclude and come to a decision: Either the Iranians want to complete this, in which case we have the impression that there will be flexibility in the Americans' stance.

"Or they don't want to complete this, and in that case we will be faced with a major proliferation crisis," Le Drian said.

"There will be nothing more to negotiate if nothing happens," he warned.

Negotiations to salvage the nuclear deal resumed in late November after they were suspended in June as Iran elected a new, ultraconservative government.

"Secretary Blinken reiterated the United States' firm commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of continued Russian aggression and discussed US resolve to respond swiftly and strongly to any further Russian invasion into Ukraine," the State Department also said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry met with his Algerian counterpart Ramdane Lamamra in Cairo to discuss developments in Libya, Sudan, Mali, and the Sahel and Sahara regions.

The two ministers stressed the need to intensify coordination within the framework of joint African action in a way that enhances efforts to achieve peace and security on the African continent, especially in light of the various security challenges imposed by the successive developments in the region, the Egyptian foreign ministry spokesman said on Facebook.



Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and his Algerian counterpart Ramdane Lamamra meet in Cairo. (Twitter/@MfaEgypt)

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit stressed the importance of encouraging the Libyan institutions to assume their responsibilities toward the Libyan people during this important and critical stage that would lead to the desired electoral process.

He was speaking during a meeting with Stephanie Williams, the UN secretary-general's special adviser on Libya, in the Egyptian capital, the Arab League's General Secretariat said in a statement.

The two parties agreed on the importance of holding elections that will reflect the will of the Libyan people, while continuing the security, military and economic agenda.

(With AFP and Reuters)



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Libya oil, gas exports hit 5-year high of \$21.5 bn
Libyan security forces break up protest sit-in by migrants

[Sudan doctors protest state violence in post-coup rallies](#)

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Sun, 2022-01-16 15:34

KHARTOUM: Sudanese doctors protested Sunday against violent attacks by security forces targeting medical personnel during pro-democracy rallies following last year's military coup.

"During every protest they fire tear gas inside the hospital where I work," one doctor, Houda Ahmad, said at the rally in Khartoum.

"They even attack us inside the intensive care unit," she added at the rally, where medical personnel carried pictures of colleagues they said had been killed.

The demonstration was the latest in the crisis-hit north-east African country, where protesters in the north also blockaded roads to vent their anger against an electricity price hike announced last week, and that has since been frozen.

Sudan's October 25 coup led by military leader General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan derailed a fragile transition to civilian rule, that had started with the 2019 ouster of strongman Omar Al-Bashir following youth-led mass protests. The military power grab has sparked an international outcry and triggered a new wave of street demonstrations, with another rally expected on Monday. During the turmoil of recent months, prime minister Abdulla Hamdok was detained and later reinstated but then quit, warning that Sudan was at a dangerous crossroads threatening its very "survival."

Deadly crackdowns have claimed the lives of 64 protesters, according to pro-democracy medics. A police general has also been killed in the street violence that has rocked Sudan, one of the world's poorest countries.

The UN World Health Organization said last week there had been 11 confirmed attacks on Sudanese health facilities since November.

The WHO said it was "also aware of the interception of ambulances, medical personnel and patients during their attempts to seek safety."

It called for the attacks to "stop now," pointing out that they threaten health care services needed more than ever during the Covid pandemic.

Covid-19 is a "grave threat" for Sudan, where 94 percent of the population has not been vaccinated, said the WHO.

Sudan has confirmed 93,973 coronavirus infections and about 4,000 deaths. In September, it said 64 percent of about 1,000 health workers tested had been found to be Covid-positive.

Sudan's 45 million people have also been dealing with a severe economic crisis and inflation approaching 400 percent.

On Sunday, hundreds blocked key roads in the Northern Province, 350 kilometers (229 miles) from the capital, angered by recent news electricity prices would double – a move that was then frozen, but not officially abolished.

"No vehicle will pass until the authorities have canceled this increase, because it signs the death certificate of our agriculture," protester Hassan Idriss told AFP by phone.

The protests that led to the 2019 ouster of Bashir had started after the government decided to triple the price of bread.

During the recent protests, Sudan has also often shut down the Internet and moved to limit reporting on the unrest.

In the latest move it revoked the license of Al Jazeera Mubasher, the live TV

unit of the Qatar-based network, accusing it of “unprofessional” coverage of protests, the channel said.

The United Nations is now seeking to organize talks involving political, military and social actors to resolve the crisis.

UN special representative Volker Perthes announced the bid last week saying it was “time to end the violence and enter into a comprehensive consultative process.”

The mainstream faction of the Forces for Freedom and Change, the leading civilian pro-democracy group, said Sunday it would accept the offer of dialogue if it were to revive the transition to civilian rule.

Sudan’s military in April 2019 put an end Bashir’s three-decade rule, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of the autocrat and many regime officials.

Bashir is also wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.

An imprisoned former foreign minister under Bashir, Ibrahim Ghandour, has begun a hunger strike along with several ex-regime officials, his family said Sunday.

They will only end it “once they have been freed or brought before an impartial tribunal,” his family said in a statement.

The public prosecutor’s office had recently ordered the release of several ex-officials, but Burhan instead ordered they stay in detention.

Ghandour’s family decried the “interference in judicial affairs.”

The protester movement however accuses Burhan, who was Bashir’s ground forces commander, of helping old regime figures come back to power.





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[Coalition in Yemen kills more than 280 Houthis in airstrikes on Marib, Al-Bayda](#)

Sun, 2022-01-16 16:38

RIYADH: The Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen said on Sunday that more than 220 Houthi militants were killed in airstrikes on Marib province, Saudi Press Agency reported.

The coalition added that 17 military vehicles were also destroyed during 45 operations targeting the Iran-backed Houthi militia in the oil-rich Marib province over the last 24 hours.

The coalition also said it had carried out 19 other operations targeting the Houthis in Al-Bayda province, killing more than 60 fighters and destroying 13 vehicles.

Meanwhile, Yemeni Information Minister Moammar Al-Eryani said the government strongly condemned the targeting of a hospital in Taiz which provides services to thousands of people in the city with mortar shells.

1- We strongly condemn targeting of Al-Thawra Hospital in Taiz by mortar shells, which caused material damage & panic among the management, staff and visitors of the hospital, which provides its services to thousands of people in the city that has been under siege for 7 years.

– معمر الإرياني (@ERYANIM) [January 16, 2022](#)

“Since the coup, Al-Thawra Hospital and the government, private hospitals, schools, facilities, infrastructure, private objects, citizens’ homes in Taiz was subject to indiscriminate attacks by the militia, which killed and wounded thousands of civilians, in flagrant violation of international laws,” Al-Eryani said in a tweet.

He expressed his “regret” at the international community’s silence, including that of UN and US envoys, “regarding the war crimes and crimes against

humanity against Taiz, which accommodates (the) largest population in Yemen.”

He called for “firm stances” to be adopted to stop the Houthis from shooting and bombing civilians and civilian objects in Taiz.



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Yemeni forces inflict heavy losses on Houthis in Marib

[Egypt, UK ministers talk climate change agenda ahead of COP27](#)

Sun, 2022-01-16 16:15

CAIRO: Egypt and the UK have committed to tackling climate change in a “critical decade” following a ministerial meeting.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, president-designate of COP27, and

COP26 President Alok Sharma, discussed climate change issues, priorities and areas of cooperation as part of a post-COP26 meeting to prepare for the next session of the summit, which Egypt will host this year.

In a joint statement after the meeting, the two sides promised to work to advance the guidelines of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and Paris Agreement.

The statement said: "As the current and incoming UNFCCC COP Presidencies, we affirm our joint commitment to accelerating the fight against climate change during this critical decade.

"In this context, we agreed that the UK and Egypt would strengthen bilateral cooperation to fight climate change and to maintain and build on the current momentum for global climate action."

Both parties promised to work together through 2022 and beyond to keep the 1.5 degrees Celsius target within reach, and to support the efforts of developing countries in adapting to the negative effects of climate change.

The UK will "extend its full support to Egypt to achieve ambitious results during COP27," the statement added.

"We will work together to encourage all parties to meet their commitments across mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage and finance; requesting that by the end of 2022, parties revisit and strengthen their 2030 emissions target to align with the Paris temperature goals and make progress towards doubling of adaptation finance on 2019 levels, as envisaged in the Glasgow Climate Pact," the statement said.

"To this end, we agree to continue close consultations in the months ahead, both on the ministerial and technical levels."



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