

# 2022 Look Ahead: The cultural renaissance sweeping the Gulf region

Sun, 2022-01-02 22:40

DUBAI: A century ago, as humanity emerged from the privations of the First World War and the Spanish flu, a wave of creative energy suddenly swept the globe. From London to New York and from Sydney to Tokyo, the decade known as the Roaring Twenties heralded an age of unprecedented cultural exuberance, prosperity and industrial advances.

New technologies, from automobiles to wireless radios, hit the consumer market, and a new zest for life, evident in such fields as music, art and interior design, replaced the drabness and conservatism of the pre-war age.

The phenomenon was viewed as a reflection of a pent-up desire to make up for lost time – a feeling perhaps best captured by F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, "The Great Gatsby."

A century on, as the world takes its first tentative steps out of the gloom and turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic, many are already drawing parallels between this romanticized period of cultural, economic and technological hyperactivity and the somewhat delayed promise of the 2020s.



The Saudi House had been showcasing the Saudi cultural heritage to various audiences. (SPA)

The rollout of vaccines and falling rates of infection in mid-2021 allowed governments to ease lockdown measures and for world travel to resume. That is, until omicron emerged.

The emergence of yet another highly transmissible variant of the virus in November has shown that the pandemic is not yet over.

Far from roaring into 2022, many nations have once again opted to impose new restrictions, closures and postponements at museums, galleries, leisure facilities and performances venues.

How the latest wave of restrictions impacts the ambitions of the Gulf states remains to be seen.

Take Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has been experiencing nothing short of a cultural revolution. After decades of self-imposed isolation, it hosted scores of “first-time” events in the arts, culture, sports and entertainment industries in 2021.

The words “game-changing” and “historic” could be heard on many lips during the month of December as the Kingdom hosted the inaugural Diriyah International Art Biennale, the first Philosophy Conference, the Red Sea International Film Festival and the first Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.



The region has also welcomed the world’s favorite sports, with Formula One making its Saudi debut last month. (AFP)

“The change has happened so fast. We are exhausted but so excited and inspired,” one Saudi artist taking part in the Misk Art Institute’s Masaha

Residency told Arab News.

The cultural explosion has a lot to do with the Kingdom's commitment to expanding new and exciting aspects of its economy under the Vision 2030 reform agenda.

The Saudi Ministry of Culture was established just three years ago. Since then, with the launch of the National Culture Strategy and 11 sector-specific commissions, the Kingdom has created a vibrant cultural ecosystem.

Since early December, the Kingdom has presented "a true cultural spectacle of more than 100 events, initiatives and engagements," according to the Saudi Ministry of Culture.

The spectacle included the return of Desert X – an exhibition of monumental artworks displayed among the ancient ruins and desert landscape of AlUla.

More recently, the Saudi government announced a new \$20 billion master plan to create "a world-class destination" called New Jeddah Downtown in the heart of the Kingdom's historic Red Sea port city, which will include a museum and an opera house.

## **FASTFACTS**

No plans to postpone major art events in KSA and UAE.

Saudi Arabia hosted a record number of cultural events in 2021.

Dubai aims to become a global creative economy by 2025.

"Change has always been a constant in social development," Ashraf Fagih, head of programming at Ithra, the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, which opened in Dhahran in 2017, told Arab News.



The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, of Ithra, in Dhahran. (Supplied)

“Vision 2030 propelled us ahead, opening the doors to the Kingdom’s cultural renaissance, and the pandemic ensured that we were dynamic, resourceful and creative enough to see this change through, together as a thriving society.

“As an economic enabler, cultural catalyst and global gateway, we at Ithra were at a crucial point in bringing Saudi’s cultural scene forward to the rest of the world prior to the pandemic, which was backed by the unwavering efforts and unlimited talent pool of creatives who made it come to life in the first place.

“To ensure it would not lose that momentum, we put our creativity to the test and pulled together to ensure we safely delivered this mission at a time of remote connectivity – united.”

Indeed, unity has been essential to the survival of the creative industries through the darkness of the pandemic, as the ban on exhibitions and performances undermined opportunities for artists and performers to work and grow.

“The horrors of COVID-19 have drawn together the cultural community,” Alia Al-Senussi, a noted art patron, consultant and scholar who has worked closely with cultural organizations in Saudi Arabia, told Arab News.

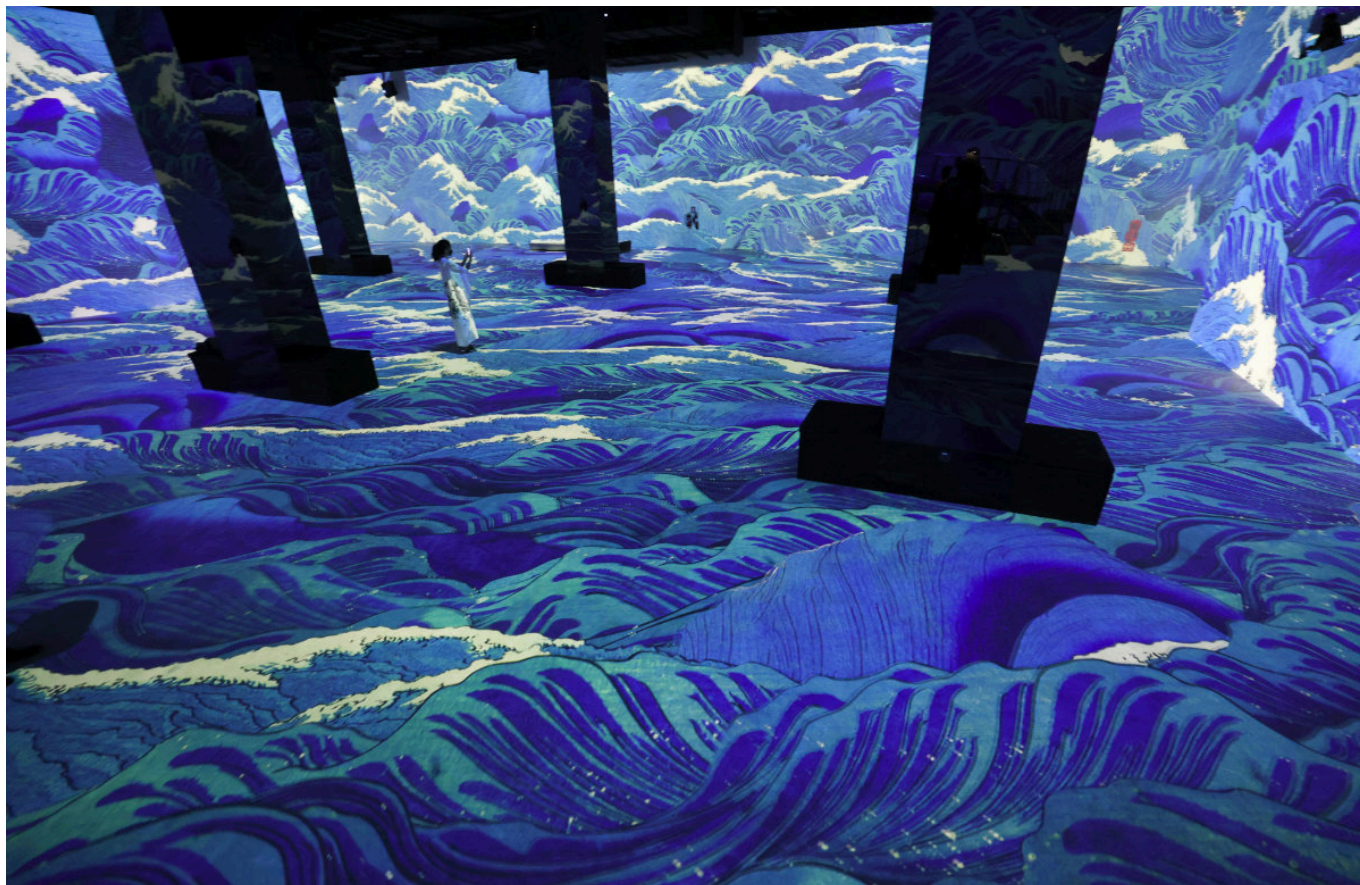


Saudi Arabia's Diriyah has been named the capital of Arab culture for 2030.  
(@MOCSaudi)

“There has been this hope that we are getting through this dark period through all these wonderful shows in Europe, art fairs such as Art Basel and the recent Diriyah Biennale. But we can't forget all the suffering that is still taking place. In 2022, there is a hope in embracing that sense of community through cultural enterprise.”

The same cultural vitality is on show in the UAE. In Dubai, open borders, high vaccination rates, widely available testing, and new visa schemes designed to encourage expatriate entrepreneurs have lured thousands of talented individuals and investors.

In spring 2021, the city staged Art Dubai, the world's first major in-person fair since the easing of lockdown restrictions. Even as omicron takes hold, there are no plans to cancel forthcoming events in the cultural calendar.



The explosion of artistic events in the region, such as the 'Infinity des Lumieres' exhibition in Dubai last June have been credited to the reforms in the Gulf. (AFP)

"Yes, COVID-19 hit Dubai hard like everywhere else, but the way the government handled it, including leading the world in vaccinations, meant that the city was able to adapt and bounce back quickly," Ben Floyd, CEO of Art Dubai, told Arab News.

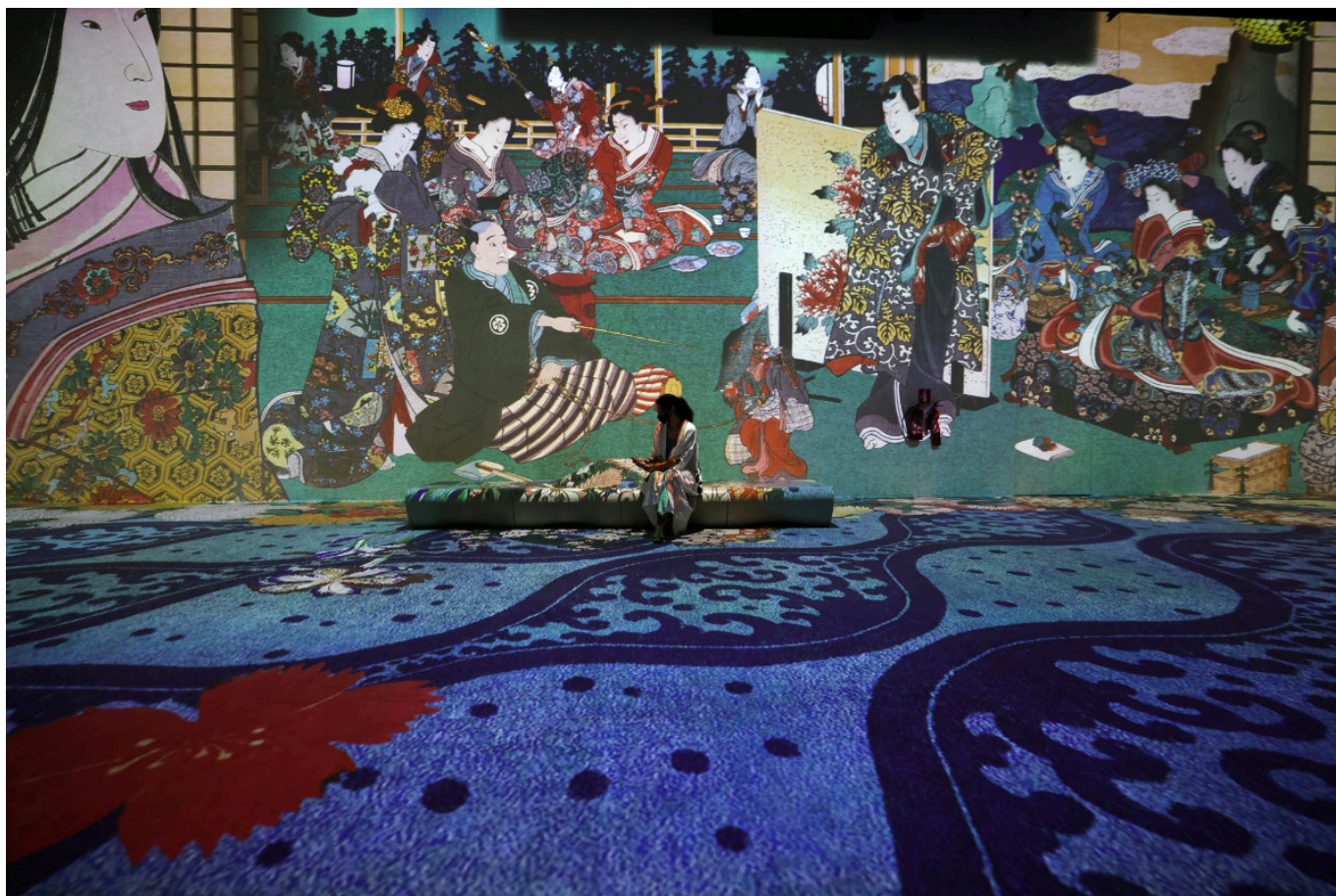
Art Dubai was able to go ahead last year "because we could see that Dubai was attracting high-net-worth families and businesses from all over the world, and we had confidence that we could produce a successful event," he said.

Will 2022 be any different? Floyd put it this way: "We have had more gallery applications than ever, and plan to further innovate our offer, continuing to lead in the sector through our programming.

"We will be launching a new digital sector in response to both the growing tech community here in Dubai and the increased interest in producing and collecting digital art and NFTs."

November's Dubai Festival for Youth Theatre, organized by the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, saw unprecedented participation from 14 theater groups from across the nation.

Then, in early December, Dubai Culture and the Department of Economy and Tourism launched "Creatives Journey," a new initiative targeting people in creative industries looking to launch their own businesses.



Shoppers and art lovers are now able view masterpieces projected onto walls and floors in an immersive experience at Dubai Mall in Dubai. (AFP file photo)

Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi announced in June that it would invest \$6 billion in cultural and creative industries on top of the \$2.3 billion already pledged as part of its post-pandemic stimulus program.

On Dec. 29, Dubai Culture launched the first ever “Creative Dubai: Dubai’s Growing Cultural Industries” report, providing a comprehensive overview of the Emirati cultural sector and charting a roadmap for its growth.

According to the report, Dubai’s cultural and creative sector contributed about 4 percent to total economic output in 2019. The sector generated revenues of more than AED37 billion (\$8.5 billion) that year and employed more than 108,000 people.

In fact, Dubai, which has more galleries than any other city in the MENA region and some of the fastest growing household spending on cultural activities, ranked among the 10 most influential cities in the world in the FutureBrand Country Index 2020.

That being said, the cultural renaissance sweeping the Gulf has been less evident elsewhere in the region, where the pandemic and resulting economic hardships have placed creative pursuits lower down the list of priorities.

Lebanon was once the region’s capital of art and culture. But with the onset of the 2019 financial crisis, the pandemic, political paralysis, energy shortages and the collective trauma of the Beirut port blast, day-to-day

survival has taken precedence.



Lebanese sculpture Nayla Romanos Iliya's artwork entitled 'On the Other Side of Time' on permanent artwork display in front of St. Elias church Beirut, Lebanon. (AFP file)

"The Beirut explosion was more powerful than COVID-19, and the country is collapsing at an incredible speed at all levels," Saleh Barakat, a Lebanese gallerist, told Arab News. "Here you don't have fuel, electricity or even water, because they can't pump it. All we can do is go on."

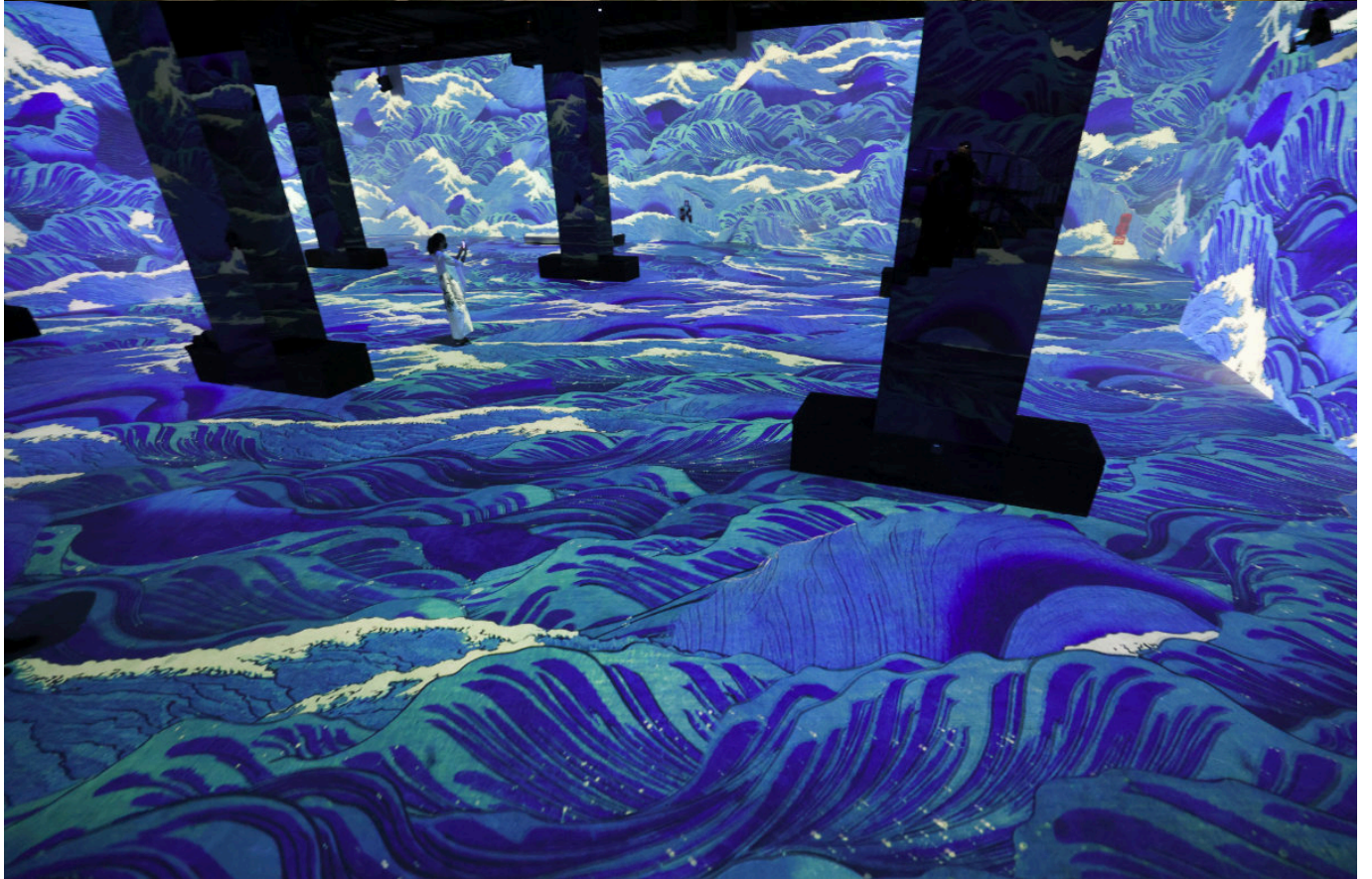
Even so, green shoots of cultural activity have somehow broken through the dense layers of despair.

"If you come to Beirut, you will be amazed at the quantity of exhibitions," said Barakat. "It is not economic. It is the result of our desire to go on with life. This is how we fight."

The decade may not be this century's Roaring Twenties as imagined or perhaps hoped for, but the same impatient urge to move on from past upheavals, embrace new aesthetics and make up for lost time is plain to see.

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• *Twitter: @rebeccaaproctor*







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2022 Look Ahead: No end to suffering in sight for war-weary Syrians

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## [Yemeni troops recapture district in Shabwa from Houthis](#)

Sun, 2022-01-02 22:52

AL-MUKALLA: Yemeni government troops pushed deeper into the Houthi-controlled territory in the southern province of Shabwa on Saturday, a day after seizing control of the district of Ouselan, local military officials said.

Fighting broke out between government troops, comprised from the Giants Brigades and army personnel, and the Houthis in Al-Nagoum and Al-Salem between Ouselan and Bayan in Shabwa province, as loyalists push to expel the Houthis from Bayhan and Al-Ain, two remaining districts in Shabwa under Houthi control, an army official told Arab News on Sunday.

The governor of Shabwa, Awadh Mohammed Al-Wazer, announced the liberation of the district of Ouselan from the Houthis during the early hours of a new offensive aimed at expelling them from oil-rich Shabwa.

Army commanders and local officials appeared in videos, taking group photos and speaking to jubilant people outside the center of Ouselan.

Giants Brigades official media also reported that their forces liberated the strategic Bin Ageel Mountain in Ouselan and surrounding areas, and are currently marching towards new areas in Bayhan district.

Warplanes from the Arab coalition on Saturday and Sunday carried out raids in Shabwa, targeting Houthi military vehicles and locations, Yemeni officials said.

By seizing control of Ouselan, the government troops have effectively cut the Houthi supply routes to their fighters in Hareb district, south of Marib, distracting the attention of the Houthis and alleviating pressure on government troops defend the city.

"This is a very important development. We have one goal, one battle and one enemy," a military official said, adding that the Houthis moved some of their forces in Marib province to defend their territory in Shabwa, relieving pressure on government forces and enabling them to score limited gains on Sunday.

"The Houthis are amassing huge forces to defend Bayhan and are inciting tribal leaders to mobilize and recruit people to fight government troops," the official said.

If the Giants Brigades and army troops fully capture Bayhan and Al-Aid in the coming days, they would surround pockets of Houthis south of Marib, including in Juba, Al-Abedia and Hareb, significantly weakening Houthi attacks on Marib from the south, and would also pave the way for government troops to attack the Houthis in Abyan and Al-Bayda.

In September, the Houthis besieged the district of Al-Abedia and opened a new front in the war south of Marib, taking advantage of their control of Bayhan in Shabwa.

The deployment of several brigades from the Giants Brigades that have long been positioned along the country's west coast, in Shabwa province, is part of a new military strategy prepared by the Arab coalition.

The strategy is based on moving forces from less fraught areas such as Hodeidah to reinforce government troops on more intense battlefields such as Marib and Shabwa.

The liberation of large amounts of land in Shabwa has sparked joy in Yemen and has given government troops on the battlefields a big morale boost.

Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi called the governor of Shabwa to congratulate him on the latest military gains in the province and ordered him to press ahead with the offensive until the Houthis are driven out of the province, the official news agency SABA said.

Hadi added that his forces would defeat the Iran-backed militia and return peace and stability to war-torn Yemen.

In a telephone conversation with the governor of Shabwa, Yemen's Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed, who is currently visiting the UAE, also praised the Yemeni troops and Giants Brigades forces for scoring military gains in Shabwa, pledging support to the governor and other commanders leading the fight against the Houthis.

The Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed Al-Jaber, also reacted to the news of the military success in Shabwa, by tweeting that the liberation of Ouselan is the "beginning of good."



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Arab coalition says more than 70 Houthis killed in strikes on Marib  
Saudi Arabia's defenses destroy 3 drones launched toward Najran

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## [Lebanon's Bassil hits out at Hezbollah amid country's political paralysis](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

ID:

1641137747515870000

Sun, 2022-01-02 14:32

BEIRUT: Lebanese lawmaker Gebran Bassil has hit out at ally Hezbollah, as the country entered 2022 experiencing the same political paralysis as the year before.

Cabinet sessions are yet to resume as the ministers of Hezbollah and the Amal movement are still refusing to attend sessions.

Bassil, who heads the Free Patriotic Movement, on Sunday sharply criticized

what he called “the militia warlords and the leaders of corruption.”

Neither Hezbollah, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, nor Lebanese Forces party leader Samir Geagea were spared in his remarks. Nor did the governor of the central bank, Riad Salameh, emerge unscathed as Bassil took aim.

Bassil, who has been an ally of Hezbollah since 2006 through the Mar Mikhael Agreement, asked: “Where is the consensual democracy? Is it (by) paralyzing the Cabinet and attacking the president and his rule? Is it by attacking the Constitutional Council? Where is the defensive strategy to solve problems with sister countries?”

His comments come amid a devastating economic crisis in Lebanon and ahead of critical parliamentary elections in which his party is expecting tough competition.

He added: “Making empty promises then belittling us and what we represent is unacceptable. Of course, we would be more powerful in the elections if we were to ally with Hezbollah, but if we need to choose between winning the elections and keeping our dignity, then I would say it’s better to be alone than with bad company.

“Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah will say that such matters should only be discussed in closed meetings. That’s true, but we have tried and tried to see eye to eye.

“We do not want to disregard the understanding we have with Hezbollah because it is a sound understanding, based on national constants. However, we want a better one because it is no longer effective. Our priority is the state and reforms. Their priority is the resistance and defending it. We cannot lose the state and the resistance, but we can win both.”

His remarks also come amid a worsening division between President Michel Aoun and his team on the one hand and Hezbollah and Berri on the other.

Further bickering is expected against the backdrop of Berri’s demand to hold an extraordinary parliament session, which requires Aoun’s signature, while Nasrallah is expected to give a highly anticipated speech on Monday.

Bassil said his party was the only one that stood against foreign projects such as the “deal of the century,” a reference to former US President Donald Trump’s Middle East peace plan, and local ones that “target our rights” as Christians.

“Those who disrupted the work of the Taif Agreement have turned our democracy into a disruptive one that prevents any decision from being taken, even if it is unanimous. I do not understand the obstruction, the Parliament approves the laws it wants and the rest is kept in the bottom drawer, including the gas law that feeds all electricity plants and the criminal audit law.”

Bassil said that Berri ultimately decided which laws were subject to discussion and which were not, and he reiterated Aoun’s demand for a decentralized administrative and financial system.

“Whoever thinks they can use force to get their way should reconsider and see where such attempts have led others.”

The lawmaker also attacked Salameh who, he said, was “politically protected by the pillars of the political system.”

He accused Salameh of orchestrating the largest organized robbery of people’s money, claiming the top banking official was wanted in seven countries but “no one dares to address him in Lebanon.”

He alleged that the governor had obstructed the criminal audit into the central bank’s accounts and was sabotaging the financial recovery plan with the IMF.

Bassil further said that Salameh had “illegally applied a haircut on deposits and is still making profits and smuggling money abroad.”

He spoke about the price the FPM had to pay for supporting Hezbollah since the international community was working on isolating it.

“When we were asked to partake in this isolation, we refused. We provided political support to the resistance against Israel and Daesh. We also received political support from Hezbollah in return and attempts to isolate Hezbollah are ongoing.”

Bassil, whom political observers believe has lost a lot of his popularity in the Christian community, accused Geagea of being “a tool for foreign parties – Israel and the US – seeking sedition in Lebanon.”

Lebanese Forces lawmaker Imad Wakim tweeted in response to Bassil’s speech: “He unleashed his delusions. Of course, he had to talk about Aoun’s lost powers and the rights of the Christians, blaming everyone except the FPM. Has he forgotten that people now refer to him as Pinocchio and no longer believe anything he says?”



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As the crises in Lebanon continue into 2022 so does the suffering of its people  
Lebanon seizes Captagon shipment in fake oranges

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## [4 Syrians die after burning coal for heat in south Lebanon](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

ID:

1641135619215683000

Sun, 2022-01-02 14:34

BEIRUT: A Syrian mother and her three children died in their sleep after

inhaling toxic fumes from burning coal to heat their room in a village in southern Lebanon, a rescue group said Sunday. Youssef Al-Dor, an official with Resala Health Ambulance Association, said he transported the bodies to be buried from a hospital where the four were pronounced dead. Al-Dor said the family used coal to warm their room on a cold night in a house in Kharayab, a southern village overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. An official from Fakhri Hospital said the mother, 31, and her kids ages 8, 7 and 4 were already dead on arrival. They were declared dead of asphyxiation. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. Lebanon's state National News Agency said the four died in their home. Lebanon, a country of 6 million people, is home to 1.5 million Syrians who fled the now decade-old civil war in their country. They often live in squalid camps and shoddy homes. As Lebanon grapples with an unprecedented economic crisis, poverty has deepened for both Lebanese and Syrians. The United Nations estimates that 90 percent of Syrian refugee households live in extreme poverty.





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Lebanon seizes Captagon shipment in fake oranges  
In exodus from Lebanon, the well-off find new home in Cyprus

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## [Egypt pushes for calm after flare-up in Gaza hostilities](#)

Author:

By ILAN BEN ZION and SAMY MAGDY | AP

ID:

1641117010684525600

Sun, 2022-01-02 09:23

JERUSALEM: Egyptian officials Sunday pushed for Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip to rein in hostilities and adhere to a cease-fire

in place since the war in May.

The Egyptian efforts came a day after Hamas militants launched rockets into the Mediterranean Sea off central Israel, prompting Israel to carry out airstrikes on militant positions in Gaza early Sunday. No casualties were reported.

The Israeli military said it struck "a rocket manufacturing site and military posts" belonging to Hamas in the Gaza Strip overnight in response to Saturday's rocket fire.

"Whoever points missiles at Israel bears responsibility," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said at the start of the government's weekly Cabinet meeting.

On Wednesday, Palestinian militants shot an Israeli contractor working along the border fence and Israel responded with tank fire at militant positions in what was the first exchange of fire in months.

Egyptian officials called on Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups in Gaza to stop their actions seen by Israel as "provocative," and for Israel to accelerate arrangements agreed upon as part of the cease-fire, an Egyptian diplomat with knowledge of the ongoing efforts said. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter with the media.

"Neither side wants a full-blown war," the diplomat said. "They just want guarantees and steps on the ground."

The cease-fire, brokered by Egypt and other mediators, has been fragile but largely held since the 11-day war between Hamas and Israel in May. But the militant group says Israel has not taken serious steps to ease the blockade it imposed on Gaza with Egypt after the Islamic movement seized control of the coastal enclave in 2007.

At the same time, the smaller Islamic Jihad militant group has threatened military action against Israel if a hunger-striking Palestinian prisoner dies. Hisham Abu Hawash, an Islamic Jihad member held by Israel under administrative detention, has staged a hunger strike for over 130 days.

Israel's controversial policy of administrative detention allows suspects to be held without charge indefinitely. Israel says the practice is necessary to keep dangerous suspects in custody without disclosing critical intelligence that could expose sources. Palestinians and rights groups decry the policy as a violation of due process.



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Egypt brings temperature down after 'malfunctioning' Hamas rockets fall into MedIsraeli strikes Hamas targets in Gaza with fighter jets, helicopters and tanks