

As the crises in Lebanon continue into 2022 so does the suffering of its people

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-30 22:37

BEIRUT: As the people of Lebanon prepare to greet the arrival of a new year, they are exhausted from the escalation of the suffering they endured in 2021.

A year marked by additional crises affecting the health sector, the judiciary and the military is ending amid increasingly frosty relations between the country's political leaders.

Images of parents in tears because they are unable to buy medicine or milk for their children, and scenes of long queues at gas stations were among the most graphic illustrations of the humiliations citizens have been subjected to.

The value of the minimum wage of 675,000 Lebanese pounds fell to just \$23 as the dollar exchange rate reached an unprecedented high of 29,000 pounds.

In the past 12 months, Lebanon has gone through crises described by the World Bank in June as "the most severe in the world."

Monetary policies were blamed as the Lebanese Central Bank experienced a further sharp decline in foreign-currency reserves. It resorted to repeatedly printing more currency to secure the necessary liquidity, which fueled inflation.

In August, it stopped subsidizing imports of fuel, and then medicines. Workers now have to spend more than half of their salaries just to travel to work. The lives of many people are at risk because medicine is not available to buy or, if it is, they can no longer afford it.

Lebanon literally fell into darkness this year, as Electricite du Liban – the country's main power company – was unable to provide minimum levels of electricity, and many people had to stop renting private generators as monthly costs soared.

The removal of state subsidies was not accompanied by any clear mechanism for protecting citizens from poverty, as a cash-card aid program for the poor and the middle class has yet to be approved.

The growing social instability was reflected in the security situation and rising crime rate in the country, with cases of theft increasing by 137 percent compared with 2020.

On Feb. 4, publisher and political activist Lokman Slim, a prominent critic of Hezbollah, was assassinated. He previously said he had received death

threats from the group.

Meanwhile Hezbollah spared no effort to consolidate its control over the country, going so far as to threaten Judge Tarek Bitar, who is leading the judicial investigation into the Beirut Port explosion, accusing him of politicizing the investigation.

Despite Hezbollah's challenges to the Lebanese government, and US sanctions, by importing fuel from Iran via Syria in September, it did not last long amid the ongoing crises.

A young man from an Arab clan in Khaldeh, south of Beirut, assassinated a Hezbollah official in August, and members of the same clan ambushed supporters of the party during the funeral of their colleague in Khaldeh, which led to the deaths of five people.

The height of the armed confrontation between Hezbollah and its opponents took place in Ain Al-Remmaneh in October, when a four-hour shootout among fighters armed with machine guns and missiles took place. Seven people died in the clashes and dozens were injured. The Amal Movement and Hezbollah accused the Lebanese Forces party of attacking protesters, loyal to Amal and Hezbollah, that were heading to the Justice Palace to demand the dismissal of Judge Bitar.

Since he took over the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion, it has been suspended seven times by politicians accused of involvement in the circumstances that led to the blast, including former Prime Minister Hassan Diab.

Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned after he was unable to form a government of independent specialists to support a French aid initiative, reportedly because the process was obstructed by the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah.

Najib Mikati took over and, after 13 months of political stalemate, formed a new government in September. The same old political forces were represented, however, and within a month its work was halted by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement.

The crisis in the country peaked toward the end of the year when Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries cut diplomatic and economic ties with Lebanon in protest against offensive criticisms made by Information Minister George Kordahi about the war in Yemen.

The politician's belated resignation failed to improve the strained relations, as Saudi authorities said that "Hezbollah continues to destabilize Lebanon and exports drugs to the Kingdom."

As a result of the continuing economic crisis, and Lebanon's inability to pay its dues for the work of the International Tribunal for Lebanon, the tribunal was permanently suspended in July.

The country faces two important political events in 2022: The parliamentary

elections on May 15, in which thousands of expatriates will be eligible to vote, and a presidential election in October.

A great challenge remains the implementation of the reforms demanded by the international community as a condition for aid to help Lebanon overcome its economic and social crises.

Lebanon has at least been promised an improvement in the quality and reliability of its electricity supply, thanks to Egypt and Jordan, in coming year. And Lebanese security services have promised to continue their fight against the smuggling of drugs through the country.

Meanwhile, the global pandemic continues to rage and, as the new year begins, many people in Lebanon will be awaiting the results of tests, amid violations of the precautionary measures to slow the spread of the virus.

The Lebanese people will be hoping that these are the only negative results they see during what they desperately need to be a better year ahead.



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Houthi strike leaves 11 dead in Shabwa

Thu, 2021-12-30 17:43

AL-MUKALLA: At least 11 Yemeni government troops were killed and 17 others wounded on Thursday when an explosion caused by a Houthi missile or drone strike rocked their military base in the southern province of Shabwa, local officials and media reports said.

Soldiers from the Giants Brigades were regrouping inside a military base in the Markha Al-Soufla district when a large explosion ripped through the base, a local government official told Arab News.

"The Giants Brigades were getting ready to advance toward other areas in Markha Al-Soufla to defend them against Houthi incursions," the official, who asked to remain anonymous, said.

Local media reports said the explosion was caused by a ballistic missile fired by the Houthis, but other sources said that an explosives-rigged, Houthi-controlled drone attacked the base.

On Tuesday night, two ballistic missiles fired by the Houthis landed inside Ataq airport in the provincial capital of Shabwa, shortly after the Giants Brigades took charge of the airport from local military units.

The newly appointed governor of Shabwa, Awadh Mohammed Al-Wazer, visited the wounded soldiers in Ataq hospital.

Yemeni military analyst Khaled Al-Nasi said that the military commanders were expecting Houthi attacks on the new troops in Shabwa and had taken precautionary measures.

"This is the nature of war, but this (Houthi attack) will not affect the work of the Giants' forces and their mission in Shabwa," he said on Twitter.

Hundreds of troops from the Joint Forces, an umbrella term for three major military units including the Giants Brigades, were relocated from government-controlled areas in Taiz and Hodeidah to the southern province of Shabwa to reinforce government troops battling the Houthis.

Local military officials say the Giant Brigades forces in Shabwa will take part in an offensive to expel the Houthis from Bayhan, Ain and Ouselan districts.

In Riyadh, the Arab coalition said it had carried out 22 air raids in support of government troops in the central province of Marib over the past 24 hours, killing 150 Houthis and destroying 15 military vehicles.

Hundreds of Houthi fighters have been killed by coalition airstrikes in the provinces of Marib, Juf, and Hodeidah in the past two months as the coalition intensified its attacks to prevent the Houthis from seizing control of new areas and to pave the way for government troops to advance.



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Houthis target airport in Shabwa with several missiles
Houthis must end 'hostile activity' in Yemeni capital Sanaa: Arab coalition

[Economy, security meetings will not settle Palestine-Israel conflict: Analysts](#)

Thu, 2021-12-30 17:28

GAZA CITY: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made a rare visit to Israel on Tuesday for a meeting with Israel Defense Minister Benny Gantz.

Gantz approved a raft of measures aimed at improving relations with the Palestine on Wednesday.

It was the second meeting between the two following their talks at the headquarters of the Palestinian presidency in Ramallah in August. That meeting focused on what the Israeli media described as "routine security

issues.”

Some Palestinian factions denounced Tuesday’s talks, labeling them a “reinforcement of internal divisions.”

But the Abbas-led Fatah movement said that it was “a serious attempt to put an end to the escalatory practices against the Palestinian people, and to open a political path based on international legitimacy.”

Palestinian Civil Affairs Minister Hussein Al-Sheikh, who accompanied Abbas, said that the meeting focused on the importance of “finding a political horizon that leads to a political solution under international legitimacy resolutions.”

Al-Sheikh tweeted that the two sides also discussed “the tense field conditions, due to the settler practices and attacks, as well as many security, economic and humanitarian issues.”

A statement issued by Gantz’s office said that the two-hour meeting discussed “maintaining security and stability, and preventing terrorism and violence,” besides civil and economic issues.

Gantz told Abbas that he will work to strengthen security coordination.

After the meeting, the Israeli Kan TV channel quoted a senior Palestinian official as saying: “The gap is very large and there is currently no opportunity for a political breakthrough.

“First of all, there must be a political horizon, without which everything we do can explode in a minute.”

The meeting came after years of political deadlock under former US president Donald Trump, who reportedly had a bad relationship with President Abbas.

The Palestinian leadership views President Joe Biden differently and has demanded that he fulfill promises made during his election campaign, including opening a political path to achieve a two-state solution, pressuring Israel to halt settlements and reopening the US Consulate in East Jerusalem, which Trump closed in 2018.

Washington has resumed financial and economic support for the Palestinian Authority, and, after a joint economic meeting on Dec. 14, announced a new package of projects.

The Abbas-Gantz meeting was preceded by a meeting between the Palestinian president and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and an accompanying delegation, and another with Yael Lempert, US acting assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs.

Although Palestinian officials said that the meetings were aimed at creating paths to a political solution, some observers warned that they were only held to prevent the collapse of the Palestinian Authority.

Last November, Israeli newspaper Haaretz said that Israel had asked the Biden administration to pressure Arab and European countries to increase financial aid to the crisis-hit Palestinian Authority, in order to prevent the deterioration of security in the West Bank.

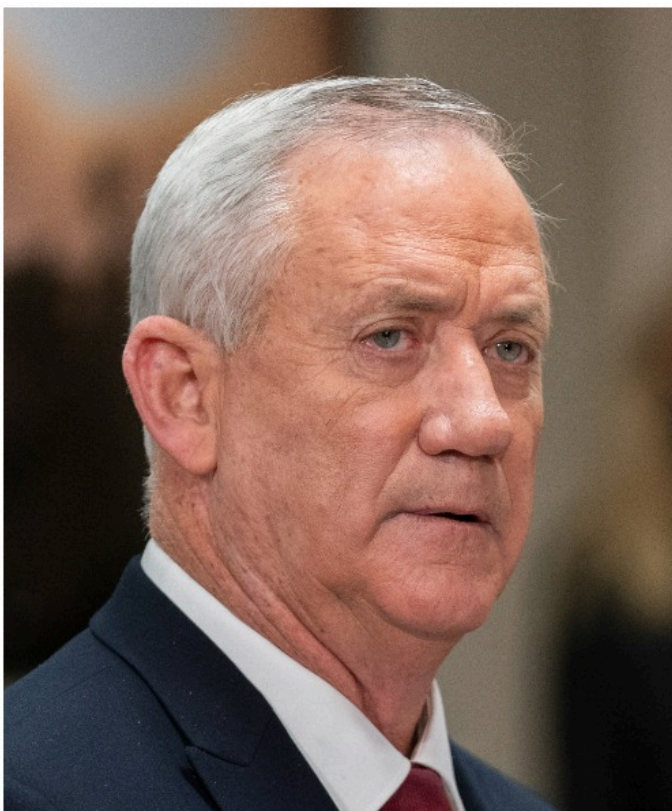
Wasel Abu Yousef, a member of the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, stressed that the Palestinian leadership believes in finding a political solution based on "the two-state option and international legitimacy," and that "the economic track cannot be a substitute for the political track."

He added: "Trump tried to promote an economic solution, pump billions to end the Palestinian political cause, and held a conference in Bahrain for this goal, but he failed.

"Without a just political solution, all movements, including Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's attempts to manage the conflict, not resolve it, are a waste of time and will fail, and will not achieve stability in the region."

Bilal Al-Shobaki, a professor of political science at Hebron University in the West Bank, said that the Abbas-Gantz meeting was based on the "economic and security track, without any political solutions."

He said Washington and Tel Aviv are "keen to save the Palestinian Authority and support it financially and economically to prevent its collapse, but without any political solutions that could lead to a Palestinian state."



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Find political solution or 'West Bank will explode,' Abbas warns Israel
Abbas, Israel's Gantz hold new high-level talks, urged by US

Two die of wounds from Israeli strike on Syria port

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-30 01:04

BEIRUT: At least two members of a pro-government militia were killed in an Israeli strike on the Syrian port of Latakia, a war monitor said on Wednesday.

The strike before dawn on Tuesday marked the second time that Israel has hit the key cargo hub since the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011.

The Israeli attack – one of nearly 30 that have hit Syria this year – caused significant damage with stacks of containers catching fire.

"Two members of a pro-regime militia were killed in the Israeli strike," the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"They had suffered serious wounds and succumbed to their injuries" in hospital in Latakia on Wednesday.

Three other militia fighters were also wounded.

Syrian state media said the containers hit in the strikes carried "engine oil and spare parts for cars and other vehicles."

But the observatory said the cargo was "arms and munitions."

Syrian government ally Iran condemned the airstrikes, describing them as "inhumane and immoral" and an example of Israel's "provocation of crisis in the region."

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh accused Israel of "making a mockery of all international laws, regulations and norms by carrying out repeated attacks on Syrian territory on false pretexts."

Since the start of the conflict, Israel has routinely carried out air strikes on its strife-torn neighbor, mostly targeting Syrian government troops as

well as allied Iran-backed forces and Hezbollah fighters.

So far this year, Israel has targeted Syria nearly 30 times, killing 130 people including five civilians and 125 loyalist fighters, according to Observatory figures.



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Syrian port ablaze as Israeli airstrikes hit Iran arms cache
Life in ruins:
Ancient sites shelter Syria's displaced

[Iraq vote victor Moqtada Sadr meets pro-Iran rivals](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-30 00:55

NAJAF: The winner of Iraq's October parliamentary election, Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, met on Wednesday with rivals from the pro-Iran Hashd Al-Shaabi former paramilitary alliance ahead of the opening of parliament.

The Oct. 10 vote was rejected by the Fatah Alliance, the political arm of the

pro-Tehran Hashd, but Iraq's top court on Monday dismissed their allegations of voter fraud and ratified the results.

It paves the way for parliament to meet and elect a president – who will then name a prime minister tasked with forming a new government.

In multi-confessional and multi-ethnic Iraq, the formation of governments has involved complex negotiations ever since the 2003 US-led invasion toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

On Wednesday, leaders including Fatah Alliance chief Hadi Al-Ameri, senior Hashd official Faleh Al-Fayyad and Qais Al-Khazali, head of the Asaib Ahl Al-Haq force – a key component of the Hashd – were hosted by Sadr at his home in the Iraqi shrine city of Najaf, according to state news agency INA.

The leaders discussed “the political situation” and the “formation of the next government,” INA reported.

Sadr, a political maverick and former anti-US militia leader who opposes all foreign interference, had already met leaders from pro-Iran parties earlier this month.

Iraq is trying to recover from years of war and jihadist violence but remains hobbled by political divisions, corruption and poverty.

Parties from Iraq's Shiite majority have previously struck compromise deals to work together, but Sadr is insistent he wants to forge a coalition capable of forming a parliamentary majority.

Sadr's movement won more than a fifth of the seats, 73 out of the assembly's total of 329. The Fatah Alliance took 17 seats, sharply down from its 48 seats in the past assembly, and Hashed leaders rejected the result.

Sadr, a self-styled defender against all forms of corruption, has repeatedly said that the next prime minister will be chosen by his movement.

The scion of an influential clerical family who led a militia against the US-led occupation of Iraq, Sadr has distinguished himself from other Shiite factions by seeking to distance himself from both Iranian and US influences.



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Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr's bloc declared biggest election winner
Iraq Shiite leader Sadr cautions vote 'losers'