

Lebanese bank workers let go as currency crash bites

Tue, 2021-11-09 00:08

BEIRUT: Lebanese banks are quietly letting employees go as they seek to close branches and reduce operational costs amid the collapse of the local currency, the Lebanese pound.

It comes after the country's central bank tightened regulations against commercial banks.

While some are downsizing domestically, other banks are opting to sell assets abroad.

The number of branches estimated to have closed ranges between 300 and 400 out of a total 1,100. Employees and contractors have been the first to feel the effects of the decisions.

George Al-Hajj, president of the Federation of Syndicates of Bank Employees, said that 2021 has been "very hard" for bank employees in Lebanon, adding: "Although no statistics have been conducted to show the exact number of laid-off employees, their number does not exceed 4,500."

But more bank workers are expected to be dismissed in the near future.

"We are in the middle of the storm, and the crisis will persist until Lebanon reaches an agreement with the International Monetary Fund on the restructuring process of the banking sector," said Al-Hajj.

The number of employees of the banking sector in 2018 was estimated to be about 26,000, working for 61 banks. Since 2019, the sector has lost more than 17 percent of its workforce.

Dr. Jassem Ajaka, an economic and strategic expert, warned that "up to 50 percent of bank employees will be laid off."

He told Arab News: "After the deterioration of the economic situation and the suspension of banking activities due to the decision to block financial transfers, the banking sector is no longer making profits.

"Banks are not charities, and the reality is hard for everyone."

"The banking sector's employees constitute a very important share of the middle class in Lebanon and eradicating this group from the economy will further harm Lebanese society."

Al-Hajj said: "In 2019, the federation saw this crisis coming and urged banks seeking to fire employees to inform the Ministry of Labor of their intentions. Some banks did, but others did not, and thus we do not know the exact number of laid-off employees."

He added: "The banks' excuses for mass lay-offs were many: Sometimes it was because the bank was applying an early retirement system, sometimes it was a resignation at a request from the administration, and other times it was the termination of contracts due to economic reasons."

Many commercial banks are also offering a set of incentives for employees to voluntarily quit.

The average salary of a regular bank employee ranges between 2,000,000 and 2,500,000 Lebanese pounds – equivalent to \$100 today but \$1,500 before the economic crisis and collapse of the currency.

This year, the Lebanese Federation of Syndicates of Bank Employees issued new protocols on the financial rights of laid-off employees, but Al-Hajj warned that "banks have not been very receptive so far."

The new rules state that "laid-off employees shall receive 18 monthly salaries as well as a bonus of two months' salary for every year of employment up until six years; a one-and-a-half-month salary for every year of employment for those who served between six and 12 years; and a one-month salary for every year of employment for those who served more than 12 years and up until 44 years of employment."

The previous dismissal protocol meant that laid-off employees only received 16 months' salary in compensation for arbitrary dismissal.

However, some banks have chosen to compensate their employees with 24 months of salary in addition to other incentives, in order to avoid clashes with laid-off staff.

Al-Hajj said: "In addition to the mass layoffs, another problem that is as serious as the first one has emerged: The devaluation of employee salaries and its tragic repercussions on the living conditions of the Lebanese.

"This problem is only getting worse as the crisis continues and thus, the number of voluntary resignations by highly qualified employees is increasing.

"This will affect the future of the banking sector. Unfortunately, the migration of these people cannot be prevented unless by reconsidering their salaries, which have become worthless."

Bechara Al-Asmar, head of the General Labor Union, estimated that the number of laid-off employees in Lebanon "since the economic crisis and the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic numbers more than 500,000 people."

The Lebanese Observatory for Workers and Employees Rights has also said that between 500,000 and 800,000 workers have lost their jobs, forcing the country's unemployment rate to surge above 50 percent.

It said that of the public sector, military and security employees who have kept their jobs, most have lost about 90 percent of the value of their salaries.

The observatory said that “325 institutions submitted requests to the Ministry of Labor to dismiss employees at the start of 2020.”

It noted the first wave of mass layoffs mainly targeted workers in the tourism sector. The crisis then extended to small enterprises and the country’s sizable black market.

“The second wave hit the education sector, where more than 2,000 teachers were laid off in 2020, according to the Teachers Syndicate in Private Schools, and their salaries were cut by 40 percent as many students left private education and were enrolled in public schools.”

The observatory said that the mass layoffs also affected “major businesses and institutions that were supposedly solid enough to bear the effects of the crisis, such as the American University of Beirut, which fired more than 1,200 workers, The Coca-Cola Company, which fired 350, and Adidas, which fired 250.”

The multinational retail franchise operator Al-Shaya Group also shut most of its companies in Lebanon and fired employees, the observatory said.

The layoffs also affected “domestic workers and non-Lebanese workers from Asia and Africa, as employers were no longer able to pay them in US dollars.

Vulnerable groups were also affected, such as daily laborers and Palestinian refugees, whose numbers are hard to estimate as they are not registered within the social security fund or at the Ministry of Labor,” the observatory added.



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Lebanese banks swallow at least \$250m in UN aid
Two Lebanese banks deny ties to Hezbollah lender

[Rare Golan Heights movie is highlight of Palestinian film festival](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Tue, 2021-11-09 00:11

RAMALLAH: A rare film to be shot in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights proved a highlight of this year's six-day Palestine Cinema Days festival that ends on Monday, with hundreds flocking to watch the movie that has Syria's civil war as its backdrop.

"The Stranger" tells the story of Adnan, a resident of the Golan who feels like an outsider in his own community but finds a new sense of purpose in helping a man who arrives in the territory after being wounded in the Syrian conflict.

Director and screenwriter Ameer Fakher Eldin said Adnan's experience is that of many Syrians separated from their home country in the Golan, territory that Israel captured in a 1967 war and later annexed in a move not recognized internationally.

"We live (in the Golan) on the border fence with our homeland. Imagine hearing the echoes of war but not seeing the war for 10 years," he said of the civil war in President Bashar Assad's Syria that erupted in 2011.

Fakher Eldin told Reuters that that experience had prompted him to ask "who do these wars belong to ... and is it a war inside of us or not."

At the start of Palestine Cinema Days, now in its eighth year, actors and filmmakers posed on the red carpet outside Ramallah's Cultural Palace in the occupied West Bank, in scenes typical of film festivals everywhere.

But unlike them, this festival is held across six cities often separated by borders and checkpoints. The films were seen in the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, Nazareth and Haifa, and audiences included members of Israel's Arab minority who regard themselves as Palestinian citizens of Israel.

"We want to reach our audience in the different cities and towns," said festival spokesperson Khulood Badawi.

“We want to give them this opportunity to go back to the cinema and to revive cinema culture in these cities despite the obstacles that the Israeli occupation is imposing.”

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 conflict and cites security concerns in maintaining checkpoints across the territory.

Among other films screened at the 2021 festival was “Bread and Butter,” which documents the precarious commute, via crowded checkpoints, of Palestinians to jobs in Israel and of those without work permits who are smuggled into the country.

“Cinema is a tool, to raise our voices, to tell our story, our narrative,” said Badawi.



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[Militias ‘tried to murder Iraqi PM with Iranian-made drones’](#)

Tue, 2021-11-09 00:03

JEDDAH: The attempted assassination of Iraq’s prime minister was carried out by at least one Tehran-backed militia using explosives-laden drones made in Iran, security officials and militia sources said on Monday.

Mustafa Al-Kadhimi escaped unhurt when three drones targeted his residence in

Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone on Sunday. Two of the weapons were intercepted and destroyed, but a third detonated, damaging the building and injuring several of his personal bodyguards.

The incident has sent tensions soaring in Iraq, where powerful Iran-backed paramilitaries are disputing the result of a legislative election last month that dealt them a crushing defeat at the polls and greatly reduced their strength in parliament. Many Iraqis fear the tension could spiral into broad civil conflict if further such incidents occur.

Baghdad's streets were emptier and quieter than usual on Monday, and additional military and police checkpoints in the capital appeared intent on keeping a lid on potential violence.

Iraqi officials and analysts said the attack was meant as a message from militias that they were willing to resort to violence if excluded from the formation of a government, or if their grip on large areas of the state apparatus were challenged.

"It was a clear message of, 'We can create chaos in Iraq – we have the guns, we have the means'," said Hamdi Malik, a specialist on the militias at the Washington Institute.

Militia sources said the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards overseas Quds Force travelled to Iraq on Sunday after the attack to meet paramilitary leaders and urge them to avoid any further escalation of violence.

Two Iraqi security officials told the Reuters news agency that the Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq groups carried out the attack in tandem. A militia source said Kata'ib Hezbollah was involved but could not confirm the role of Asa'ib.

One of the Iraqi security officials said the drones used were of the "quadcopter" type containing high explosives capable of damaging buildings and armored vehicles.

The official said they were the same type of Iranian-made drones and explosives used in attacks this year on US forces in Iraq, carried out by Kata'ib Hezbollah.

Malik said the drone strike indicated that the Iran-backed militias were positioning themselves in opposition to the influential Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, who also controls a militia – a scenario that would hurt Iran's influence and therefore would probably be opposed by Tehran.

"I don't think Iran wants a Shiite-Shiite civil war. It would weaken its position in Iraq and allow other groups to grow stronger," he said.

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council condemned the attack "in the strongest terms."

"The members of the Security Council underlined the need to hold perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts

of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice,” it said.



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Iraq vote recount shows no 'fraud,' says electoral commission
Iraqi PM unhurt after failed assassination attempt at his residence

[How neglect of health services left MENA countries ill-prepared for COVID-19 shock](#)

Mon, 2021-11-08 23:32

DUBAI: A combination of chronic underfunding of public health services and long-term socio-economic trends resulted in a tenuous and uneven recovery for the Middle East and North Africa region as it emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a recent World Bank report.

Titled, "Overconfident: How economic and health fault lines left the Middle

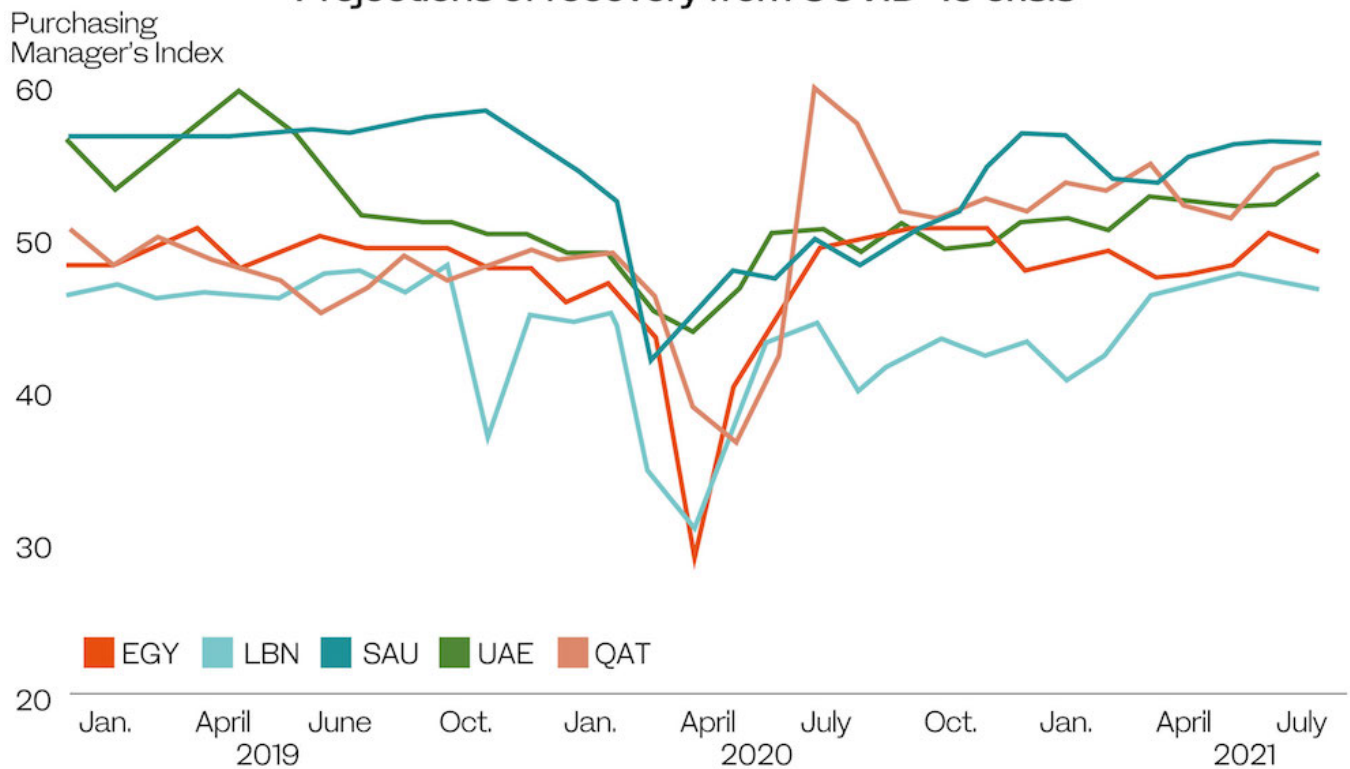
East and North Africa ill-prepared to face COVID-19,” the report highlights the stress MENA health systems were under even before the pandemic hit.

The study says that a bloated public sector and excessive national debt crowded out investment in MENA countries in social services such as health – a symptom it described as “fiscal myopia.” In turn, that shifted some health costs to individuals.

Another symptom of stressed public health systems was the low share of government spending on preventive healthcare, a drawback that contributed to high rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

The report found that the region’s public health systems were not only ill-prepared to absorb the shock of the pandemic but also that authorities were guilty of over-optimism in self-assessments of their health systems’ preparedness. The survey referred to this as “overconfidence.”

MENA POST-PANDEMIC PICTURE Projections of recovery from COVID-19 crisis



Source: Bloomberg, L.P

ARAB NEWS

Experts say the World Bank report has revealed the extent of the region’s social and economic inequalities, caused in large part by poor governance and skewed policy priorities. However, they caution against a generalizing that tends to gloss over differences at local levels.

Dr. Theodore Karasik, a senior adviser at Gulf State Analytics, told Arab News: “The lesson is about turning around priority within government budgets and other outside help besides having in place a much better healthcare system.

“However, the countries of the region all had different types of experiences and the lessons learned are going to be unique to those spaces.”

MENA governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in their own ways, depending on the resources and infrastructure that were on hand. Many worked within the international system or cooperated with regional donors to secure vaccines and medical supplies.

Some countries, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council energy exporters, were able to organize a rapid response to the pandemic thanks to robust systems and better preparation. “The models set up in the Gulf are extremely useful to compare and contrast on how they worked,” Karasik said.



Some countries, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council energy exporters such as Saudi Arabia, were able to organize a rapid response to the pandemic thanks to robust systems and better preparation. (AFP/File Photo)

“These models are working and there is evidence of them being used in other countries. So, leaders are applying what they see as the best methods.”

Some MENA governments that were slow to respond to the global virus outbreak, later adopted many of the same practices as their GCC counterparts, recognizing that disease control needed to be a far greater priority.

However, given the sharp differences in the region’s socio-economic circumstances, with some countries even categorized as fragile or failed states, emulation of GCC practices was no magic bullet. The UAE and Lebanon, for instance, were worlds apart in their respective vaccine rollouts.

“The differences between an urban versus a rural environment and how violence can mitigate treatment is a key issue that governments and health practitioners (must take into account),” Karasik told Arab News.

The estimated cumulative cost of the pandemic in terms of gross domestic product losses in the MENA region by the end of 2021 will amount to almost \$200 billion. According to the World Bank report, the region’s GDP contracted by 3.8 percent in 2020 and is forecast to grow by just 2.8 percent this year.



A picture taken on May 24, 2020 shows a man walking across a deserted street in Rabat, as the country went into lockdown to stop the spread of the

COVID-19 disease. (AFP/File Photo)

Ferid Belhaj, the World Bank's vice president for the MENA region, said: "The pandemic's crippling impact on economic activity in the region is a painful reminder that economic development and public health are inextricably linked.

"It is also a sad reality check that MENA's health systems, which were considered relatively developed, cracked at the seams under the crisis."

Thirteen out of 16 countries in the region have lower standards of living in 2021 than their pre-COVID-19 levels, the report said. But for individual countries, the growth rate of GDP per capita in 2021 has been uneven, ranging from -9.8 percent in Lebanon, which is in a deep recession, to 4 percent in Morocco.

Roberta Gatti, the World Bank's chief economist for the MENA region, said: "The last two years have shown that pandemic control is essential not only to save lives but also to accelerate economic recovery, which is now tenuous and uneven across MENA."

INNUMBERS

*** 3.8% – MENA's GDP contraction in 2020.**

***2.8% – Region's projected growth in 2021.**

(Source: World Bank)

Dr. Albadr Al-Shateri, a former politics professor at the National Defense College in Abu Dhabi, says the events of the past two years have exposed serious weaknesses in the pandemic preparedness of not just the MENA region but in fact the entire world.

"Health security has not been prioritized as much as traditional security concerns. Governments invest heavily in all kinds of weapon systems, but less in health security," he told Arab News.

To prevent a repeat of the COVID-19 calamity, Al-Shateri said, the international community, and the MENA region in particular, must work harder to coordinate their efforts.

"The region has got to establish, in cooperation with the World Health Organization and other centers of excellence, a center for disease control for the region. The world and regional powers should contribute to such an endeavor," he said.

Such an approach to fighting infectious diseases will benefit the entire MENA region, according to Al-Shateri. Specifically, developed and affluent countries should extend aid to the less-fortunate nations, and a regional forum for countering diseases should help drive health security.



A Moroccan municipal worker disinfects outside a house in a closed street in the southern port city of Safi on June 9, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

In conclusion, Al-Shateri said: “All epidemics are potential pandemics, and their consequences are catastrophic for the region and the world. The region must put in place collective efforts to stop any disease dead in its tracks.”

Few experts have been surprised by the World Bank’s findings, considering that many of the fundamental weaknesses highlighted by the report – low expenditure on public health, critical health infrastructure deficits, lack of human resources and equipment – are not unique to MENA countries.

“This is nothing new,” Dr. Richard Sullivan, director of the King’s College London conflict and health research group and principal investigator and chair of the R4HC-MENA program, told Arab News.

“(What is needed is) future resilience to epidemics and pandemics, intrinsic strengthening of basic public health systems, and a complex and heterogeneous picture across the region.”

Dr. Adam Coutts, a research fellow at Harvard University’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, says the key lesson to be drawn from the past 10 years is that public health and social welfare in countries such as Lebanon have been low political priorities.

“One can safely say that they do not care about the health and well-being of their populations,” Coutts said.



A prong extending from the CIRA-03 remote-controlled robot prototype approaches the mouth of a volunteer to extract a throat swab sample, as part of a self-funded project to assist physicians in running tests on suspected COVID-19 coronavirus patients in a bid to limit human exposure to disease-carriers, at a private hospital in Egypt's Nile delta city of Tanta.
(AFP/File Photo)

“Also, donor governments and multilateral agencies have let countries like Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria get away with minimal investment in public services for decades. Meanwhile, millions cannot access healthcare due to out-of-pocket costs.”

Apparently, people in countries such as Lebanon spend as much as Germany on healthcare as a proportion of GDP, but much of the money is poured into the private health system.

“Lip service is paid to policies such as universal healthcare in the region. We have yet to see any concrete steps taken in terms of actual political will, investment, and on-the-ground change,” Coutts said.

He said the pandemic has exposed just how hollowed-out some of these MENA states' infrastructure really was to start with. Although these countries were badly hit by conflict and humanitarian crises, the “internal rot” had set in years before.

“Above all, the crisis shows that the political economy of health is a key area that needs to be addressed when examining the region and designing recovery policies.”



Syrians suspected of being infected with COVID-19 receive treatment at Mouwasat Hospital in the capital Damascus, on March 31, 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

In Coutts's opinion, Jordan and the GCC countries have shown that the rule of law, stability and providing social protection are crucial if a nation is to withstand a shock such as COVID-19.

Most MENA countries, however, have not yet returned to pre-pandemic conditions and Coutts does not foresee Lebanon, for instance, recovering in the next few years as they are "too far gone and politically sick."

He says that under the circumstances, donors and multilaterals must make aid conditional upon major social and economic reforms, which provided good social protection policies.

"Politicians in laggard countries will maintain they are trying to change but they are in fact not," Coutts said.

"Only punitive measures work in these circumstances, I am afraid, otherwise nothing happens on the ground."

Twitter: [@CalineMalek](https://twitter.com/CalineMalek)



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UAE coronavirus cases below 100 for seventh day
Israel reports subvariant of Delta coronavirus strain

[Israel spied on Palestinian human rights defenders, investigators claim](#)

Mon, 2021-11-08 23:32

AMMAN: Israel used controversial spying software to target Palestinian human rights defenders, international digital investigators have claimed.

In a press release, the Dublin-based Front-Line Defenders outlined how the timing of Israel's declaration to brand six human rights groups as "terrorist" organizations was issued two days after its use of a spying application was discovered.

The FLD said its digital forensic investigation “has uncovered the presence of Pegasus spyware on the phones belonging to at least six Palestinian human rights defenders.”

The search for Israeli spyware was launched when a staffer from the Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq contacted the FLD regarding concerns about their phone on Oct. 16.

“A forensic analysis was immediately made and by the next day it was determined that Pegasus spyware was present,” the statement said.

The next day, Mohammed Al-Maskati, the FLD’s digital protection coordinator, requested additional information in a meeting with representatives from six Palestinian NGOs: Addameer, Al-Haq, Defense for Children – Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, the Bisan Center for Research and Development, and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees.

After informing them of the breach, six iPhones, out of 75 checked devices, were found to be infected with the Pegasus spyware.

The FLD, the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab, and its Amnesty International Security Lab – which independently peer-reviewed FLD’s work and confirmed the results – were unable to identify the client who deployed the spyware, but noted that “actions taken by the Israeli government raise many questions.”

On Oct. 18, Israel ordered the revocation of the residency of Salah Hammouri, a Jerusalem-based lawyer and human rights defender, on the basis of Israel’s “breach of allegiance” law.

Hammouri’s phone was one of the six infected.

He is also a French citizen. Without residency, he would be subject to deportation from his homeland.

Israel’s Defense Minister Benny Gantz issued an executive order on Oct. 18 setting forth the determination that the six Palestinian NGOs – the same six NGOs that held the meeting on Oct. 17 with the FLD – were “terrorist” entities.

Ubai Aboudi, director of the Bisan Center for Research and Development, which was one of the six Palestinian organizations accused of being a “terrorist” outfit by Israel, told Arab News that the discovery of the spyware on his phone made him feel insecure and exposed.

“I feel violated. My privacy has been infringed upon. My family and my work as a human rights defender are also exposed to risks. I feel insecure,” said Aboudi, who also holds US citizenship.

In publishing the report, FLD Executive Director Andrew Anderson said: “The exposure of illegal spying on peaceful Palestinian human rights defenders, coming on top of baseless claims about terrorism against internationally respected human rights organizations, emphasizes how important is the

continued support of the international community for their legitimate work.”

He added: “Surely, this episode will serve as a stark warning against any deployment of the term ‘terrorist’ against any human rights defender anywhere in the world, and renew efforts to reign in the use of spyware against human rights defenders, journalists, and other civil society activists.”



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Criticism over Israeli ‘terror’ label for Palestinian groupsUN says Israel move designating Palestinian groups as ‘terrorist organizations’ unjustified