

Netanyahu's hopes for a comeback dim as Israel passes budget

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TEL AVIV: Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu watched from the sidelines Thursday as the government that toppled him after 12 years in power passed a national budget, dealing a major blow to his hopes of a swift return to the country's top office.

The man whose shadow loomed so large for so long over Israel, whose rule sparked both mass protests and cult-like devotion, has been relegated to the backbenches as opposition leader, far from the levers of power and exposed to serious corruption charges.

The first budget to be passed in three years, during which a prolonged period of political gridlock brought four divisive elections, was a stress test for Israel's fractious coalition government.

"It changes the timeframe for him," said Anshel Pfeffer, a columnist at the left-leaning Haaretz daily and Netanyahu biographer. "It doesn't mean he's going to give up. He's not going to give up. He's incapable of giving up." Failure to pass the budget before Nov. 14 would have resulted in the dissolution of the government and snap elections – giving Netanyahu, who is rising in the polls, a chance at redemption. Now that it has passed, the government – established with the goal of ousting Netanyahu – appears to have bought itself some time. Coalition parties are struggling in the polls and none is likely to want to topple the government and trigger new elections, for now.

Netanyahu's best hope is that the coalition, made up of eight ideologically diverse parties, implodes over its own contradictions. Otherwise, his next chance will come when the government rotates its leadership in 2023, bringing the centrist Yair Lapid to power and perhaps giving his nationalist coalition partners a reason to bolt.

Aviv Bushinsky, a former Netanyahu aide, said Netanyahu is better off biding his time as opposition leader, a public platform from which he can contest the legal charges and ratchet up support from constituents.

"Right now he's in no hurry. He has nothing to lose," he said.

Addressing parliament on Wednesday, ahead of the budget vote, Netanyahu vowed to carry on.

"We will continue to fight this awful government. We will leave no stone unturned, we will look for any way to topple it, to return Israel to the right track," he said.

Netanyahu, a major figure in Israeli politics for the last quarter century, suffered a dramatic downfall earlier this year.

He began a 12-year run as prime minister in 2009, after an earlier stint in the 1990s, becoming Israel's longest serving leader and helping to shape the country.

He was ubiquitous on the world stage, preaching against Iran's nuclear program and the accord with world powers meant to rein it in.

He ramped up settlement building in the occupied West Bank, avoided peace talks with the Palestinians and presided over three wars against the Hamas militant group ruling Gaza.

He worked hard to convince Israelis that he was a world-class statesman, the only one who could safely guide Israel through its myriad challenges.

But under Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who has traveled to the global climate summit, steered Israel through a fourth COVID-19 wave and passed a budget, that argument has eroded.

"Suddenly you don't need to be Benjamin Netanyahu to be the prime minister of Israel. And that in itself has sort of been a revelation," Pfeffer said.

Netanyahu also used his office to divide Israelis, whipping up nationalists against dovish leftists, Jewish Israelis against Palestinian citizens of Israel and railing against the country's institutions, especially after he was indicted in three corruption cases.

Netanyahu is on trial for fraud, breach of trust and bribery, charges he denies but which clouded his last years in office.

Under Israeli law, Netanyahu did not have to step down after being indicted, leaving him a bully pulpit from which he could fight the charges, push to legislate immunity and air his grievances against the media and the judicial system.



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Outgoing Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu gets his first smartphone Benjamin

[Vietnam seeks information from Iran about seized oil tanker](#)

Author:

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Fri, 2021-11-05 00:05

HANOI: Vietnam was seeking more information on Thursday about a Vietnamese oil tanker that was seized at gunpoint last month by Iranian soldiers in the Gulf of Oman, while vowing to ensure the safety and humane treatment of the ship's crew members.

Iran's powerful paramilitary Revolutionary Guard troops on Oct. 24 took control of the MV Southys, a vessel that analysts suspect of trying to transfer sanctioned Iranian crude oil to Asia. US forces had monitored the seizure but ultimately did not take action as the vessel sailed into Iranian waters.

The episode was the latest provocation in Mideast waters as tensions escalate between Iran and the US over Tehran's nuclear program.

Vietnamese officials "continue to closely follow the developments and work closely with Iranian authorities to resolve this issue in accordance with the law and enact necessary measures to safeguard the rights and interests of Vietnamese nationals," Pham Thu Hang, deputy spokesperson in Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said on Thursday.

The captain of the MV Southys told the Vietnamese Embassy in Iran that all 26 crew members were being treated well and were in "normal health," Hang told reporters at a scheduled briefing.

Iran celebrated its capture of the vessel in dramatic footage aired on state television Wednesday, the day before the 42nd anniversary of the 1979 seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran.

Ship-tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press from MarineTraffic.com showed the vessel still off Iran's southern port of Bandar Abbas on Tuesday. A satellite photo from Planet Labs Inc. also showed the vessel off Bandar Abbas in recent days.



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Iran seized Vietnamese oil tanker: US officials Iran says stopped US navy seizing tanker in Sea of Oman

[Mikati urges Kordahi to prioritize national interest over populist slogans](#)

Thu, 2021-11-04 23:37

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Prime Minister Najib Mikati on Thursday again called on Information Minister George Kordahi to resign to avoid further escalation with the Gulf.

He urged him to put national interests first and not to "disrupt the government's work and waste more time."

Mikati also had stern words on Thursday for his partners in government, Hezbollah and its allies, for exacerbating Lebanon's diplomatic spat with various Gulf states.

He stressed that "the country is not run by defiance, arrogance, raised

tones, and threats, but rather a common discourse that unites the Lebanese people so they can work together on saving Lebanon.”

Mikati also gave what seemed to be a strongly-worded speech against Hezbollah and its allies.

“Anyone who thinks they can impose their opinion by impeding work and verbal escalation is wrong,” said Mikati.

“Anyone who thinks they can impose on the Lebanese choices that steer them away from their history, their Arab depth, and their close ties with the Arab countries and the Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia, is also wrong.”

Mikati returned on Wednesday from Glasgow, after participating in the COP26 summit, on the sidelines of which he held a series of meetings with international officials regarding the diplomatic and economic crisis between Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

The row was triggered by statements Kordahi made before becoming a minister, in which he offended Saudi Arabia and defended the Houthis in Yemen.

Speaking to Al-Mayadeen TV, Kordahi responded to Mikati’s request, saying that he will not resign and that his position has not changed.

On Thursday, Mikati met separately with President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and briefed them on the talks he held on the sidelines of COP26.

He said that he and Aoun agreed on a roadmap to exit the current crisis with Gulf states.

Mikati noted: “When we formed this government after months of disruption, delay, and missed opportunities, we announced that we are on a quick rescue mission to advance cooperation with international bodies and the International Monetary Fund, in addition to holding parliamentary elections.

“We believed that the painful reality that our country is experiencing would push everyone to let go of personal interests, and actively participate in the rescue mission, but this, unfortunately, did not happen.”

Mikati also commented on the Tayouneh incident and the decision of the ministers of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah to boycott the Cabinet until Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the investigation into the Beirut port blast, is removed from his post.

He also criticized “the approach of exclusivity and obstruction that the government was subjected to from within.”

He added: “One month in, we faced our first challenge as a government, as we were dragged into intervening in a judicial order that we have nothing to do with.

“We refused to interfere in the Beirut port blast probe but stressed the need

for Bitar to correct his course, especially when it comes to trying presidents and ministers. But that was not enough for some people.”

Mikati noted: “We were in the process of finding a way to hold a Cabinet session, but we had to face a more difficult challenge in light of Kordahi’s personal views, which he had expressed before becoming a minister, and Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states decided to cut ties with Lebanon.”

The prime minister said: “The Cabinet is the natural place to discuss all issues of concern to the government, away from dictations, challenges, raised tones and threats. The Cabinet will never be a means to interfere in any matter that does not concern the government, and specifically in the work of the judiciary.”

Mikati called on “all ministers to show solidarity and adhere to the ministerial statement, which set the basic rules for the government’s work and policy. We are determined to deal with the relationship with Saudi Arabia and Gulf states based on sound rules.

“We will not allow political arguments to take over this issue. In this context, I call on Kordahi once again to follow his conscience, assess the circumstances, do what should be done, and prioritize national interest over populist slogans. I am betting on his patriotic sense to evaluate the situation and the interest of the Lebanese citizens and expats.”

The prime minister also stressed that “anyone who believes that obstruction is the solution” was misguided. “Everyone must realize that no party unilaterally speaks on behalf of Lebanon and the Lebanese people,” he added.

According to political observers, Mikati received international support during his stay in Glasgow.

Political writer Tony Francis told Arab News: “Those whom Mikati met in Glasgow asked him to assume his role as prime minister and that the ball is in his court and he must act. The international community will not accept the resignation of his government.”

Francis added: “Mikati’s stances are kind of adventurous, to which Hezbollah and its allies may not respond. Everything depends on what the Iranians want in the region, and they are exploiting all fronts to get what they want.

“On the other hand, we see that Iran has agreed to resume the nuclear negotiations in Vienna on Nov. 29. Mikati’s raised tone may be part of the Western response to the Iranians; all of this means that things will remain ambiguous and no solution will be reached before Nov. 29.”



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Mikati fears slippery slope if Lebanese-Saudi crisis is not resolved
Houthi militia put up posters backing Lebanese minister, George Kordahi

[Rumors swirl over Erdogan's declining health after G20 hobble](#)

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Thu, 2021-11-04 21:35

LONDON: Allies of the Turkish president have denied that his health is in decline after footage emerged online of him appearing to struggle to walk.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 67, was filmed during Sunday's G20 Summit in Rome in which he appeared to be unsteady on his feet. The footage fueled speculation that Turkey's long-time ruler's health is in decline.

In the video, Erdogan is seen walking apparently unsteadily away after a photoshoot, before a number of guards rush to his aid and move a thin rope fence out of his path.

His allies have responded furiously to the rumors of his declining health, with his official spokesman Fahrettin Altun tweeting a video showing him walking normally at the G20 Summit.

Rumors of Erdogan having cancer, which he denied, have also proliferated over the years after he had growths – polyps – removed from his small intestines in 2011 and 2012.

Erdogan, sometimes dubbed the new “sultan” of Turkey, has dominated the country’s politics for nearly two decades, first as prime minister in 2003 then as president in 2014.

But Turkey’s declining economy and out-of-control currency inflation appear to be hurting his popularity.

In 2019, his party suffered several defeats in city mayoral elections, even after he had forced a re-run of the polling in Istanbul.



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Turkey pact fuels fears of drone use in Ethiopia's spiraling civil war

Author:

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LONDON: An alliance between Ankara and Addis Ababa is fueling concerns that Turkish drones will be used in Ethiopia's escalating civil war.

The military cooperation agreement was signed in August by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The terms of the deal have not yet been made public, but Reuters reported in October that Ethiopia had requested Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones, considered to be among the most effective munitions of their type in the world.

The conflict in Ethiopia recently entered a new phase after beginning over a year ago, when government forces recaptured the Tigrayan capital Mekelle from separatist Tigrayans.

Government troops were later expelled from Mekelle, and an offensive by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front was initiated beyond the state's borders, targeting Amhara and Afar provinces.

Recently, the TPLF announced that its new stated goal is to capture Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.

A UN report released on Wednesday concluded that all parties in the conflict had committed abuses, including war crimes.

The UN has also sounded the alarm over the humanitarian situation in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia, saying only 10 percent of aid meant for the province was ever delivered.

While neither Ankara nor Addis Ababa have publicly commented on the deal, last month Ethiopia-based journalist Martin Plaut was reportedly handed a fragment from a Turkish-manufactured guided bomb used against Tigrayan forces.

It cannot be conclusively determined from where it was fired, but Western experts said the missile from which the fragment came can be used by the Turkish drones, The Guardian reported.

Alex de Waal, director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University, told the newspaper: "The fighting is already at an intense scale and

ferocity, with perhaps 100,000 soldiers already dead on the Ethiopian side. Five million civilians are in need of food aid as a result of the conflict, and yet Addis is still shopping for drones and other arms.”

Turkey’s drones themselves are expected to increase the ferocity of the fighting in Ethiopia and could destabilize other parts of Africa, experts have said.

“What we are seeing is the consequences of the international community not wanting to deal with drone proliferation,” Chris Coles, from UK-based NGO Drone Wars, told The Guardian.

“Drones are heating up conflicts in the region because pilotless munitions lower the threshold for war. A country might be condemned for supplying boots on the ground to intervene in a conflict, but there is far less complaint if instead they are supplying drones.”

Global demand for the Turkish drones spiked worldwide after their decisive use by Azerbaijan last year in its short-lived war with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

They are manufactured by Baykar Makina, whose Chief Technology Officer Selcuk Bayraktar is married to Erdogan’s younger daughter.



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Ethiopia orders emergency as Tigray forces threaten capital Ethiopia's PM
defiant as rebel Tigray forces make advances