

Saudi Arabia issues calming statement as Lebanese tensions rise over port explosion case

Author:

Wed, 2021-10-27 01:33

BEIRUT: Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Lebanon Waleed Bukhari told Lebanese religious figures on Tuesday that the Kingdom "cares for Lebanon's security, stability, institutions and co-existence between Christians and Muslims."

The Saudi embassy's media office said: "There is no legitimacy for the discourse of strife, nor for one that goes against Lebanon's Arab identity."

This was the first Saudi statement since the bloody clashes in Tayouneh on Oct. 14.

At least seven people were killed in the violence in Beirut amid a protest organized by Hezbollah and its allies against the lead judge probing last year's blast at the city's port.

The protestors, gathered by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, demanded the removal of Judge Tarek Bitar from the investigation.

According to the embassy's statement, Lebanon's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian "expressed his appreciation for the Kingdom, led by King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, for never abandoning Lebanon and its people, despite the unfair stances against the Kingdom by some Lebanese parties that only represent themselves."

Sheikh Derian added that "the Saudi-Lebanese relations have always been and will remain solid regardless of any offensive speeches because our relations are above these speeches and Saudi Arabia will always see Lebanon as an Arab brotherly country."

The statement comes after the Intelligence Directorate summoned the head of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea, to the Defense Ministry on Wednesday as part of the investigation into the bloodshed in Tayouneh.

The summoning was the motivation for Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi's spontaneous visits on Tuesday to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Prime Minister Najib Mikati and President Michel Aoun.

Al-Rahi denounced "the summoning of Geagea only by the Intelligence Directorate to testify."

Charles Jabbour from the Lebanese Forces party told Arab News that "Geagea will not appear at the Defense Ministry on Wednesday.

"They should start with summoning Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah. All

parties should give testimonies, beginning with the party that called for the demonstration. Only when a judge dares to summon Nasrallah, will we be able to talk about a state and a judiciary in Lebanon.”

The move to summon Geagea was condemned by several political figures.

Former Premier Saad Hariri refused “to engage in an absurd conflict and the frontlines of a civil war and sectarian divisions.”

He added: “Announcing that Dr. Geagea was informed to appear before the Intelligence Directorate via a plastered notification is absurd and leads the country into further division along with using state machinery for revenge politics.”

Former Premier Fouad Siniora also denounced “the bias of the judicial authorities in the military court over the deplorable Tayouneh events and the continuing violations of the constitutions by those who were entrusted with the task of preserving and protecting it.”

Siniora rejected “the practices seeking to use the judiciary for reprisals against political opponents, and not for its main mission: To seek the truth and achieve justice.”

Lebanon’s Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblat criticized the “selectivity instead of a transparent and just investigation for a comprehensive justice.”

He said: “All those who fired shots in the Tayouneh events should be arrested, without discrimination, and this destructive and futile political dispute must be ended.”

Samy Gemayel, head of the Lebanese Kataeb Party, announced his rejection to “all the means Hezbollah and the Amal Movement have resorted to in hampering the investigation into the Beirut port blast.”

Hezbollah accused Geagea of firing the first shot on Oct. 14 at the demonstrators who penetrated the anti-Hezbollah and Christian-majority Ain Remaneh area.

Former Prime Minister Hassan Diab, who is also a defendant in the Beirut port explosion investigation, visited Sheikh Derian on Tuesday, reiterating his demand “to either lift immunity from everyone without exception, or adopt the legal and constitutional mechanisms in force in the Supreme Council for the Trial of Presidents and Ministers.”

So far, all the politicians who have been accused of being involved in the Beirut port blast have declined to appear before Judge Bitar.

Amal Movement and Hezbollah ministers have refused to attend Cabinet sessions unless Judge Bitar is removed and the investigations into Tayouneh are halted, causing a governmental paralysis at a time when Lebanon is in desperate need of reforms to unblock the international aid that would lessen its dire economic situation.

Prime Minister Mikati hoped on Tuesday that “Cabinet meetings will resume as soon as possible to make the decisions required to activate the work of commissions and committees and do what is needed from the government.”

Mikati added that he hoped his government would supervise “the parliamentary elections with full integrity, to enable these elections to renew the political life in Lebanon.”

The joint parliamentary committees held a session on Tuesday and voted to keep the electoral law as it was, thus rejecting Aoun’s proposal to make amendments.

Aoun had objected to holding the elections on March 27 and to the proposals to change the expatriate voting formula by canceling the six seats allocated for Lebanese voters who live abroad.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Waleed Bukhari](#)

[Saudi Arabia](#)

[Beirut port explosion](#)

Lebanon top politicians agree solution to political tensions, cleric says
Lebanon’s Najib Mikati hopes cabinet meetings resume soon

Damascus bookshops disappear as crisis hits culture

Author:

Wed, 2021-10-27 01:08

DAMASCUS: The Damascus bookshops and publishing houses that once stood as beacons of Syria's intellectual life are being replaced with shoe shops and money changers, as culture falls casualty to crisis.

Syria is home to some of the Arab world's literary giants, and Damascus boasted an abundance of busy bookshops and publishing houses printing and distributing original and translated works. But the city's literary flare has faded.

A decade-old civil war, a chronic economic crisis and a creative brain drain that has deprived Syria of some of its best writers and many of their readers, have compounded worldwide problems facing the industry, such as the growing popularity of e-books. "People can't afford to read and bookstores can't cover the expenses of staying open," said Muhammad Salem Al-Nouri, 71, who inherited one of the capital's oldest bookshops from his father.

Last month, the iconic Nobel bookshop in Damascus, founded in 1970, closed its doors.

The Al-Yaqza bookshop, founded in 1939, shut seven years ago, with a shoe store now taking its place.

A money exchange office has replaced the Maysalun bookshop which was open for four decades.

The Al-Nouri bookstore, founded in 1930, is at risk of meeting the same fate.

"We wanted it to remain for our children and grandchildren," Nouri told AFP. "But the Al-Nouri bookshop is threatened with closure, as are other bookstores."

The Nouri family currently runs two bookshops in central Damascus.

Three years ago, the family was forced to close a third bookshop they had opened in the capital in 2000 because of poor sales and growing costs.

Its stock remains in place, gathering dust on fully stacked shelves.

On a wooden desk, old photos of celebrity customers, including politicians, artists and poets, are placed on display.

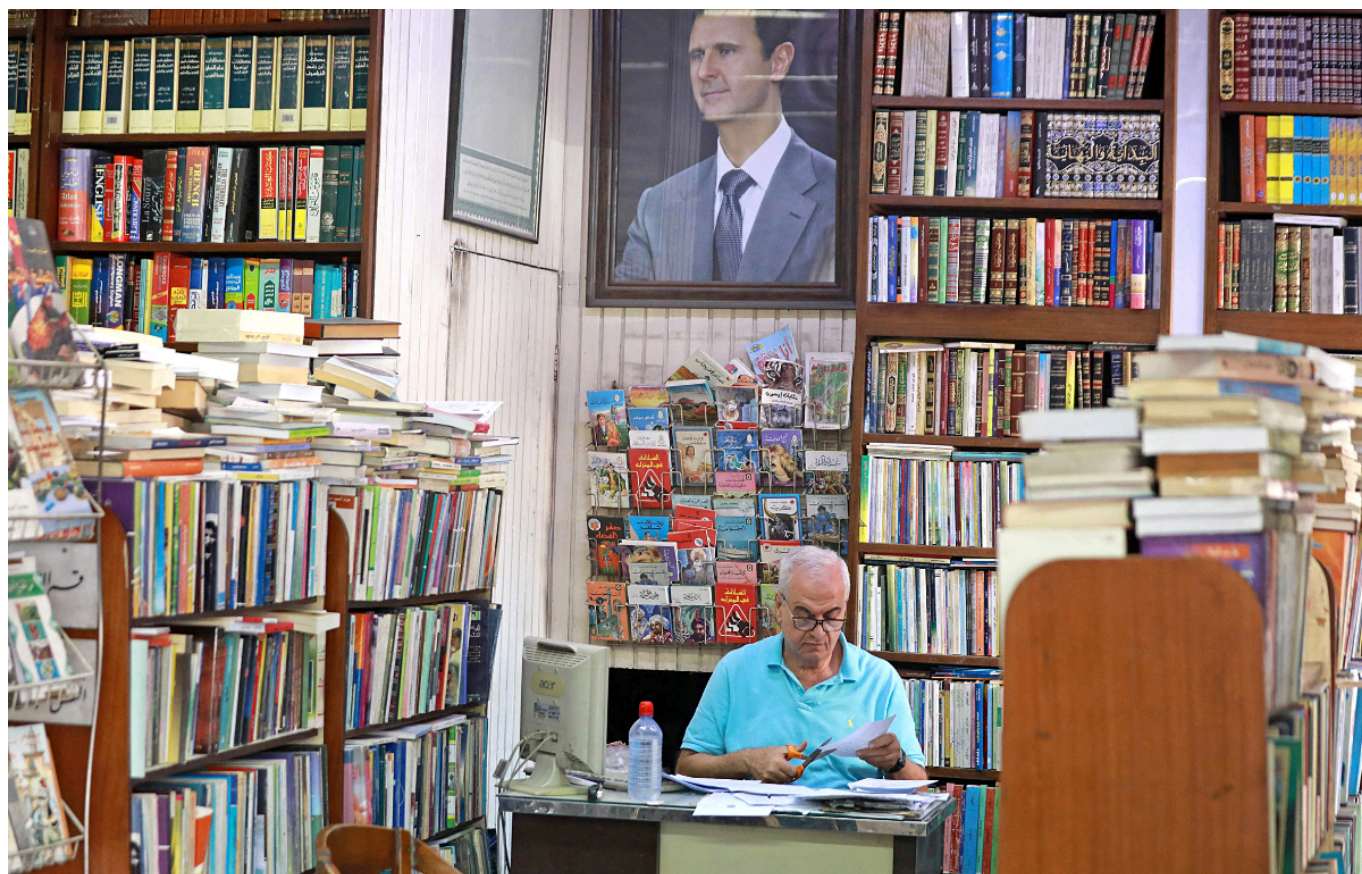
For Sami Hamdan, 40, the cultural heyday of the 1950s and 1960s is long gone. "The war has destroyed what was left" of a cultural scene that was already in retreat, said the former owner of the Al-Yaqza bookstore.

With 90 percent of the population living below the poverty line and prices skyrocketing in the face of the plummeting value of the Syrian pound, “no one is going to invest in a bookshop during conflict,” Hamdan told AFP.

For Khalil Haddad of the Dar Oussama publishing house, books have become a “luxury” for Syrians.

Surging printing costs and logistical difficulties linked to power cuts have combined to make books too expensive for most, the 70-year-old told AFP.

“People’s priorities are food and housing,” he said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Damascus](#)

[Syria](#)

[Books](#)

Donations pour in to rebuild Gaza bookshopRare books shed light on history of the Arab world

Iraq blames Iran for drastic decline in river flow

Author:

Wed, 2021-10-27 00:49

DARBANDIKHAN, Iraq: Iraqi officials warned Tuesday of a drastic drop in the flow of water in a river from Iran due to low rainfall and dam-building in the neighboring Islamic republic.

The Sirwan river begins in Iran, flowing to Darbandikhan Dam in northeastern Iraq before going through the rural province of Diyala and joining the Tigris.

“There has been an unprecedented decline,” said Rahman Khani, the dam’s director. “The water level has fallen by 7.5 meters in one year.”

The drop was attributed to low precipitation and “the building of more dams in Iran which retain water,” he told AFP.

Khani said the dam had this year received 900 million cubic meters of water – a fraction of the annual average of 4.7 billion cubic meters.

The decline had led to a 30 percent fall in electricity production from the dam, he added, warning against the impact on agriculture in Diyala province.

Iraq – which relies on Iran for much of its electricity – has suffered extreme water shortages in many areas in recent years.

This is owing in large part to upstream dam-building in Iran and Turkey, but also to factors relating to climate change and droughts, which have affected the wider region.

The situation has prompted Iraq’s Water Resources Minister, Mahdi Al-Hamdani, to call on his government to file a complaint against Iran at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

A foreign ministry spokesperson refused to comment on the matter.

Aoun Thiab, a senior adviser at the water ministry, said Iran was “violating international law by diverting a river flow” based on the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention on the use of water that crosses international borders.

Thiab acknowledged however that seeking justice would be “a political decision and not a technical one.

“The waters of the Sirwan river have been completely cut off,” he told AFP.

Iran has also its own decline in water levels due to drought, said a report from the country’s space agency cited by Mehr news agency.

On Tuesday, an official said Tehran was facing its worst drought in 50 years as he reported a 97 percent drop in monthly rainfall compared with last year.

The Iranian capital has had 0.4 millimeters of rain since Sept. 23, compared with 14.3 mm over the same period in 2020, said Mohammad Shahriari, deputy director of the company that supplies the region.

“Groundwater and surface water are at a critical state and there has not been a similar drought for the past 50 years,” he was quoted as saying by Iran’s ISNA news agency.

In July, deadly protests broke out in the drought-hit southwestern province of Khuzestan after people took to the streets to vent their anger over water shortages.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)

[Iran](#)

[Sirwan river](#)

[Darbandikhan Dam](#)

Iraq pledges to end harmful gas flaring by 2025
Iran provincial governor slapped in a rare security breach

UN says Israel move designating Palestinian groups as 'terrorist organizations' unjustified

Wed, 2021-10-27 00:45

GENEVA: Israel's designation of six leading Palestinian civil society groups as outlawed "terrorist organizations" is an unjustified attack, the UN human rights chief said Tuesday.

The Jewish state said its move last week was due to their alleged financing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

It accused the six of working covertly with the leftist militant group, which pioneered plane hijackings in the 1970s to highlight the Palestinian cause and is blacklisted by several Western governments.

Michelle Bachelet said the decision was an attack on human rights defenders, on freedoms of association, opinion and expression and on the right to public participation.

She called for the move to be immediately revoked.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said anti-terrorism legislation should not be applied to legitimate human rights and humanitarian aid activities.

"The organizations ... face far-reaching consequences as a result of this arbitrary decision, as do the people who fund them and work with them," said Bachelet.

"The crucial work they perform for thousands of Palestinians risks being halted or severely restricted," she added.

She said the decision would have "a chilling effect" on human rights defenders.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Israel](#)

[Palestinian human rights groups](#)

[Michelle Bachelet](#)

Israel envoy to brief US over ban on Palestinian groups
UN experts denounce Israeli branding of Palestinian rights groups as terrorists

[Lebanon top politicians agree solution to political tensions, cleric says](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1635275672811234000

Tue, 2021-10-26 22:17

BEIRUT: Lebanon's top Christian cleric on Tuesday said the country's three leading politicians agreed to a "solution" to political tensions and government paralysis tied to high-profile judicial investigations. "There is a constitutional and legal solution to the current crisis," Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai said during a news conference after a day spent shuttling between the prime minister, the parliament speaker and president. An official source said the solution involved prosecuting former ministers charged over the August 2020 Beirut port explosion at a special court made up

of MPs and judges while allowing blast investigator Tarek Bitar to continue with the cases of lower-level officials.

The special court, formed by a parliamentary vote, has never held any official to account.

Bitar has sought to question top officials including former ministers affiliated with the Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's Amal movement and the Marada Movement, both allies of Iran-backed Hezbollah, which has responded with a smear campaign accusing Bitar of politicizing the probe.

Rai had earlier said after a meeting with Berri that issues had to be resolved "because Lebanon is dying, the people are dying and the state is disintegrating."

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati has not convened a Cabinet meeting since Oct. 12, pending a solution to the standoff that has paralyzed government for over two weeks.

The dispute spilt over into the Cabinet when ministers allied to those parties called for Bitar's removal in a heated discussion during the last session.

Rai also said he was "slightly upset" about the summoning of Lebanese Forces party leader Samir Geagea by army intelligence for a hearing over fatal clashes in Beirut's Ain Al-Remmaneh neighborhood this month.

On Oct. 14, seven people, all followers of Hezbollah and Amal, were shot dead during a Beirut protest the parties organized against Bitar, the worst street violence in more than a decade.

The parties said the seven were killed by supporters of the Christian Lebanese Forces party headed by Samir Geagea, who has backed the blast investigation. Geagea has repeatedly denied the allegations.

Geagea was summoned for a hearing on Wednesday by army intelligence. No other top politician has received such a summons.

On Tuesday, Geagea's lawyers filed a motion claiming the summons was unlawful, while attorneys representing a number of detainees submitted a motion requesting that Judge Fadi Akiki recuse himself from the case.

A group of Ain Al-Remmaneh residents this week filed a lawsuit against Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah, claiming fighters under his command involved in the clashes had undermined "national unity" and committed terrorist acts.

President Michel Aoun, a Hezbollah ally who has said Bitar's probe should continue, on Tuesday urged the government to resume Cabinet meetings in order to reach a funding agreement with the International Monetary Fund, widely seen as the only way for Lebanon to access desperately needed international aid.

Rima Zahed, the sister of port blast victim Amin Zahed and a member of a committee representing the families of victims, warned against "any kind of settlement or deal" that infringed upon the reach of the investigation.

"No-one can threaten us with sectarian tensions or the difficult situation the Lebanese people are in. Politicians need to know this," she said. "There will be no deals made over the blood of our martyrs."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai](#)

[Beirut blast](#)

[Hezbollah](#)

Lebanon's Najib Mikati hopes cabinet meetings resume soon
Lebanon's negotiations with IMF likely to start in November: minister