

Defense minister : 'Unfortunate incident, not ambush' caused Beirut protest violence

Author:

Najia Houssari

ID:

1634591336207287100

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BEIRUT: The bloody gun battles that took place last week in the streets of Beirut were caused by an "unfortunate incident, not an ambush," the country's Defense Minister Maurice Selim said Monday.

Last Thursday's clashes killed seven people and wounded 32, after a protest against the judge leading the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion turned violent.

Supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, who want Judge Tarek Bitar removed from the case, carried out the protest.

Hezbollah has accused the Lebanese Forces party, which backs Bitar, of firing on the people at the protest.

But Selim told the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation: "The demonstration deviated from its course and clashes broke out. The circumstances of what happened remain to be determined by the ongoing investigation, which relies on facts and evidence to hold those responsible accountable."

The site of the armed clashes was between the Shiite-dominated neighborhood of Shiyah and the Christian neighborhood of Ain Al-Rummaneh, with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades used.

Security footage at one of the entrances to the Ain Al-Rummaneh neighborhood went viral, upending claims about demonstrators being subjected to deliberate sniper fire from the rooftops of residential buildings.

The footage showed a member of the Lebanese army shooting at a person who insisted on bypassing the military checkpoint and entering Ain Al-Rummaneh. There was chaos when this person was shot down. People threw stones and there was an exchange of fire.

Army command said: "The soldier who fired the shots is under arrest and is being investigated by the competent judiciary."

So far, 20 people from both sides of the violence have been arrested.

Hezbollah MP Hussein Hajj Hassan accused the Lebanese Forces of "committing a massacre" against peaceful demonstrators, despite the video showing a soldier shooting at them.

"Hezbollah believes the criminal and killer to be the Lebanese Forces. But the resistance, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement will not be drawn into a civil war, as they are aware of this malicious conspiracy implemented by the Lebanese Forces," he added.

The incident has turned into a political as well as judicial dilemma.

Ministers from Hezbollah and the Amal Movement are abstaining from Cabinet sessions until Bitar is taken off the probe and until "the perpetrators and those involved in the Tayyouneh incident, the gunmen, snipers, their

operators, their commanders, their chiefs, and everyone who has anything to do with this matter are brought to justice," Hajj Hassan said.

Lebanon's administration has been inoperative since last Friday. Friday was a national day of mourning, followed by the weekend.

All institutions will resume their work on Tuesday including parliament, which is holding a plenary session and restoring the immunity of MPs, especially those that Bitar had called for questioning.

MP Qassem Hashem, from the Development and Liberation bloc, denied news about an expedited draft law to establish an exceptional judicial body whose jurisdiction would look into the decisions, procedures and arrests carried out by Bitar, with the exception of the indictment he issued to reach the public trials before the Judicial Council.

"This matter contradicts the constitutional principles that we are keen to abide by. The draft law needs a constitutional amendment and this is not on the table," Hashem said.

President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Najib Mikati have insisted on the independence of the judiciary and have called for non-interference in judicial affairs.

It is not within the power of the Supreme Judicial Council to dismiss Bitar or to force him to take a certain course in the investigation.

However, Bitar's course of investigation is still subject to pressure.

On Monday, Lebanon's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian expressed his fear over coexistence, the National Accord Document, and the constitution.

"We should adhere to justice, but according to a clear path so that people are not divided over justice, as well as over politics" he said and warned of this "suicidal path" which everyone was "enthusiastically" jumping at.

He called it an atmosphere that reminded people of the beginning of the civil war.

"Every sane Lebanese should refrain from engaging in suicidal actions, and insist on the constitution, coexistence, and civil peace. Fighting in the street is forbidden, whatever the reason. Solutions can be reached through peaceful means, not by using uncontrolled weapons in the streets, especially in the capital, killing people and violating their sanctities."

On Sunday, Lebanon's Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai said that harming national peace and neighborliness was unacceptable, regardless of its source.

"We refuse to go back to arbitrary accusations, sectarian mobilization, attempts to isolate, compromise settlements, fabricate files against this group or that, choose scapegoats, and replace justice with revenge."

He stressed the need to abide by the law and the judiciary, and avoid political, sectarian and partisan interference. "We need to respect the judiciary's independence and let it correct what must be corrected by its judicial methods."

Al-Rai called on the Cabinet to convene, as every minister should respect judicial authority, and exercise their responsibility in the name of the Lebanese people, not in the "name of influential figures."

"Force does not frighten the believers in Lebanon. There is no weak party in Lebanon. We are all strong by our right to exist freely and our loyalty to the homeland without any interference."



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Hezbollah's Nasrallah says Beirut violence was a dangerous event Families of Beirut blast victims back judge amid pressure

[Turkey shifting Syria strategy after Kurdish militia's attacks](#)

Author:

Menekse Tokyay Ankara

ID:

1634591287857283500

Tue, 2021-10-19 00:07

ANKARA: Turkey is shifting to a proxy force strategy and diplomacy with the US and Russia to counter the Kurdish People's Defense Units in Syria instead of deploying its own troops, analysts have said.

It comes after senior Turkish officials hinted at a strategy change regarding the war-torn country following deadly attacks by the militia in the Kurdish-dominated Tal Rifaat region, which targeted Turkish police officers.

The militia has also engaged in a cross-border shelling campaign against nearby Turkish villages.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Ankara was "determined to remove all

threats in northern Syria," while Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu pledged that Turkey "would do what is necessary for its security," adding that neither the US or Russia had kept their promises to ensure the withdrawal of the militia from the Syrian border.

But the Turkish government has said that the military will pursue a "much more different campaign" in northern Syria, sparking debate over whether Ankara will engage in diplomatic talks with the US and Russia before launching possible military action.

The militia is the chief local partner of the US in its fight against Daesh in the region, while Turkey considers the Kurdish group and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party, as Syrian extensions of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has fought a civil war against the Turkish state for more than three decades.

In the meantime, the Syrian Liberation Front branch of the Syrian National Army said that it is "determined to clear our regions from all terror groups," including the Kurdistan Workers's Party, Democratic Union Party and Daesh.

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish program at the Washington Institute, said that every time Russian President Vladimir Putin has allowed Turkey to enter Syria and seize territory from the Kurdish militia, he has demanded that Turkey end its support for rebel groups.

"This involved a land exchange with either Turkey taking territories from the YPG (Kurdish People's Defense Units in Syria) or the Bashar Assad regime taking territories from the hands of the rebels. But this new model that we are talking right now is a bit different from this one. Now, Turkish-backed troops in Syria, instead of Turkish troops, might move in to take an area from the YPG with a tacit agreement from Putin," he told Arab News.

According to Cagaptay, Ankara's broader strategy is to divide the militia-controlled zones and prevent the formation of any future political entity in the group's territory.

"The recent Erdogan-Putin deal in Sochi aimed at implementing this new model," he said.

Amid particularly sensitive times for US-Turkey relations, a growing emphasis on diplomatic channels outweighs military action, he added. Erdogan is expected to discuss the issue with US President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Rome at the end of October.

After their recent meeting in Sochi, Erdogan will also talk to Putin following his meeting with Biden.

According to Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director of the German Marshall Fund of the US, the threat that Turkey sees in the Kurdish militia is the possibility of a Kurdish state being formed close to its borders.

"Ankara is therefore taking whatever measures it can to prevent this from happening," he told Arab News.

Unluhisarcikli said that current conditions mean that it is unsuitable for Turkey to conduct military operations against YPG-held territories in northwest or northeast Syria.

Therefore, Ankara will push diplomatic channels to proceed efficiently, he added.

"Turkey is already in a tense relationship with Russia over Syria's rebel-held Idlib province and would not like to add a new layer to these tensions. At a time when Turkey is trying to improve relations with US, it would not

like to introduce a new headache,” he said.

Meanwhile, during a press conference last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the Biden administration does not support efforts to normalize relations with the Assad regime.

Experts also note that the fate of Idlib province, hosting about 4 million civilians under the control of Turkish-backed rebels, will be critical in the coming days in shaping the calculus of Turkey’s relationship with Syria, with a potential migrant influx causing domestic political worries for Ankara.

On Saturday, shelling by regime forces of the opposition-held town of Sarmada on the northern outskirts of Idlib near the Turkish border killed four people and wounded more than a dozen, according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.



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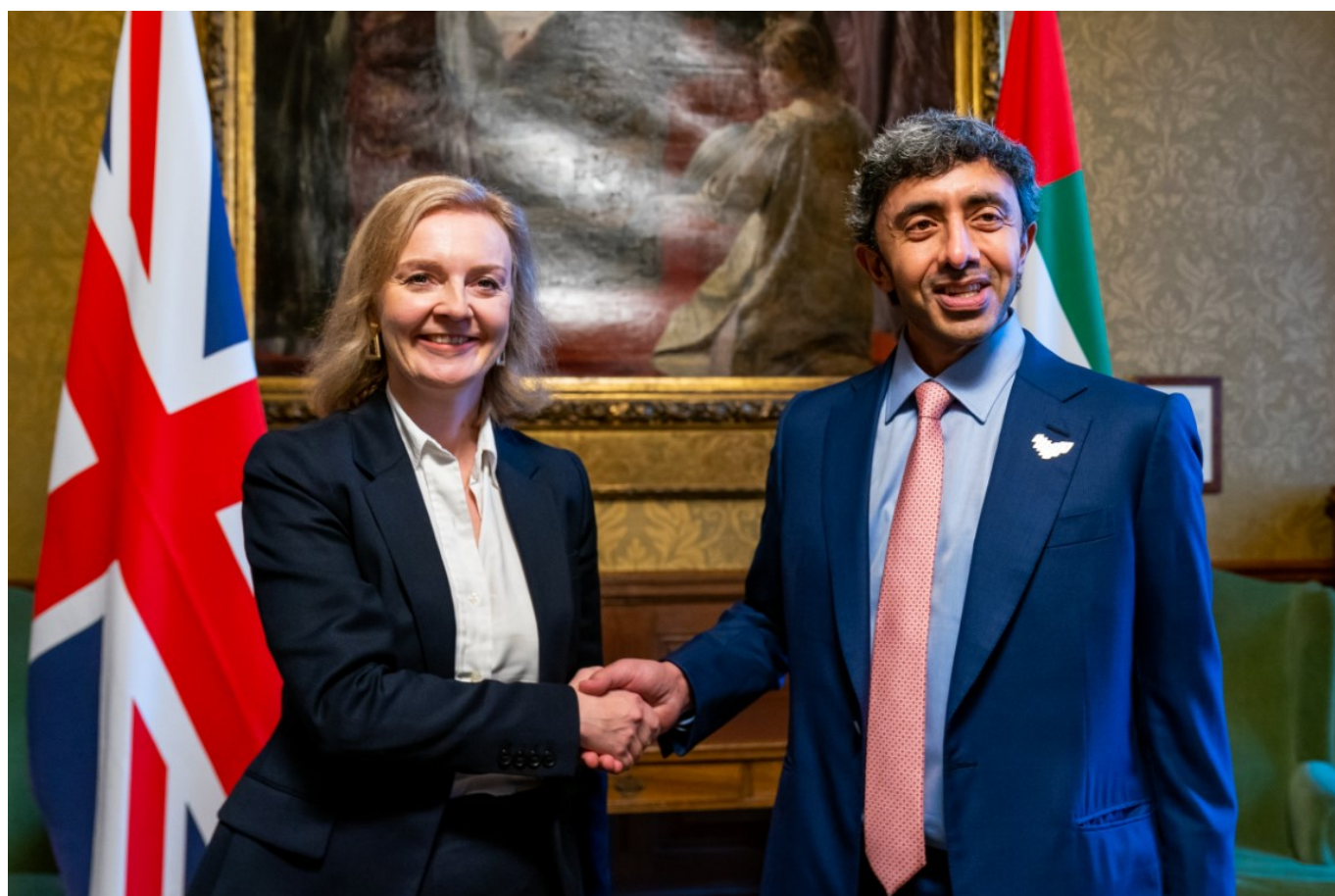
Erdogan: US proposes F-16 sales in return for Turkey’s F-35 investment Turkey says it will do ‘what is necessary’ after Syria attacks

[UAE and UK foreign ministers discuss strengthening cooperation](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-10-18 23:59

LONDON: UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed and British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss have pledged to develop areas of joint cooperation and enhance their development relations. The ministers met in London on Monday, where the two sides discussed ways to enhance joint cooperation in all fields, including economic, trade, investment and climate change. Sheikh Abdullah's visit comes after a recent visit by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed to the UK, where he met with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and announced the establishment of a new and ambitious partnership between the two countries for the future. Sheikh Abdullah and Truss also discussed regional and international issues of common interest. During his visit, the UAE foreign minister also held talks with the UK health secretary Sajid Javid, Nadhim Zahawi, secretary of state for education, and Alok Sharma and president of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26).



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UAE space center launches startup incubator Saudi air force joins UAE combat

Yemeni government takes new measures to curb devaluation of riyal

Author:

Saeed Al-Batati

ID:

1634590902647239800

Tue, 2021-10-19 00:01

AL-MUKALLA: The Central Bank of Yemen on Monday closed six exchange firms and shops for not complying with its anti-speculation regulations, bringing the total number of outlets blacklisted since Saturday to 60.

The Aden-based bank vowed to crack down on more money traders if they did not abide by the bank's monetary rules, warning others against dealing with the banned entities.

"The bank calls upon all exchange companies and establishments to exercise caution and abide by all instructions issued by the central bank," it said in a statement.

Despite the bank's fresh punitive measures against violators, the Yemeni riyal reached a new record low against the US dollar, falling to nearly 1,400 riyals on the black market.

In the past, the Aden-based bank closed dozens of exchange companies and firms, ordered the other companies and private companies to send their annual financial statements to the bank and asked Sanaa-based banks to move operations to Aden.

On Sunday, the Yemeni Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed, supported the central bank's latest measures to rein in the depreciation of the riyal and ordered judiciary and security authorities to implement the bank's punishing measures.

The Yemeni government also suspended the internal transfer network between exchange companies – known as hawala – and ordered security forces to enhance border checks to prevent the smuggling of foreign currencies outside the country.

Aden Gov. Ahmed Hamed Lamli on Sunday banned rent being paid with the US dollar or the Saudi riyal in another bid to curb the demand for foreign currencies.

Despite the latest measures, blacklisted entities opened their doors on Monday as the riyal continued to hit new lows amid unprecedented speculative activities by money dealers.

Critics questioned the government's ability to reinforce the rules or to bring the chaotic market under its control, citing unfulfilled measures during the past five years when the Yemeni riyal began to tumble.

"The bank's measures did not target currency barons who control the market and are heavily involved in speculation," a local money trader told Arab News

on condition of anonymity.

People in the city of Al-Mukalla, the capital of the southeastern province of Hadramout, told Arab News that local exchange firms sell the dollar at 1,400 Yemeni riyal and buy it at 1,200 riyals.

The devaluation of the currency since last week has led to a historic rise in the prices of basic goods such as rice, cooking oil, wheat and flour, prompting shop owners to barricade their stores as violent protests sparked in some government-controlled areas.

“We are bearing the brunt of the devaluation as we buy our goods in Saudi riyals and sell them in Yemeni riyals. Big traders would not be impacted as they buy and sell goods in Saudi riyals,” a local trader, who preferred to remain anonymous, told Arab News.

Roads were closed and tires were burnt in the southern province of Lahj amid protests against the fall of the riyal and skyrocketing prices. Last month, at least three people were killed and many others wounded during violent protests against the crumbling economy and currency in several cities in southern Yemen.

Yemeni economists and sociologists have warned that the continuing fall of the riyal would fuel a new round of violence in the liberated provinces, widening the already big gap between the poor and rich and pushing thousands of Yemenis into hunger.

Mohamed Salem bin Jumaan, an associate professor of sociology at Hadramout University, said that the government and local authorities in the provinces must listen to people’s grievances and work on addressing economic woes – including the fall of the riyal – or risk more violent protests.

“Many families are below the poverty line. The middle class no longer exists. Solutions must be found to reduce the level of violence. People block roads and cause violence when they think no one listens to them,” the academic told Arab News.



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More than 150 Houthis killed, injured in Yemen's Abedia: Arab coalition
Saudi UN envoy calls for international consensus on Yemen at Human Rights Council

[Hezbollah's Nasrallah says Beirut violence was a dangerous event](#)

Mon, 2021-10-18 21:00

BEIRUT: The leader of Lebanon's Iran-backed Shiite group Hezbollah said on Monday that last week's Beirut violence in which seven Shiite Muslims were shot dead was a dangerous development and marked a new phase in the country's internal politics.

In his first remarks since the worst street violence in over a decade, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah lashed out at the Christian Lebanese Forces party and its head Samir Geagea, repeating accusations that they were responsible for the killings on Thursday.

"The real agenda of the Lebanese forces is civil war," Nasrallah said in a live televised speech.

Heavy gunfire erupted in Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiya, a Hezbollah stronghold, to celebrate the start of Nasrallah's speech, which came amid tensions over the investigation of last year's devastating explosion at the capital's port.

Nasrallah said Hezbollah was not the enemy of Lebanese Christians.

"The biggest threat to the Christian presence in Lebanon is the Lebanese Forces party and its head," Nasrallah said.

The bloodshed, which stirred memories of the 1975-1990 civil war, added to fears for the stability of a country that is awash with weapons and suffering an economic meltdown.

The Lebanese Forces party (LF) has denied it started the fighting last week. It blamed the violence on Hezbollah "incitement" against Tarek Bitar, the lead investigator in an investigation into the port explosion.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

It also accused Hezbollah of sending supporters into the Christian neighborhood of Ain Al-Remmaneh where it says four residents were wounded before a shot was fired.

"I advise the Lebanese Forces party to give up this idea of internal strife and civil war," said Nasrallah.

"You are wrong one hundred percent, your calculations are wrong. The region has never seen Hezbollah as strong as it is now."

Despite his tough stand, Nasrallah dedicated a significant part of his speech to trying to reassure Lebanon's Christians, saying Hezbollah was protecting their rights and is allied with the largest Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement.

Lebanon's Shiite Amal movement, a Hezbollah ally, said earlier that the Beirut violence was intended to reignite internal strife and threaten peace. The seven victims were killed as crowds headed for a demonstration called by Amal and Hezbollah to protest against Bitar.

"What happened showed the Lebanese people the truth behind what these groups are doing in terms of trying to ignite internal strife and national division and threaten civic peace, and push the Lebanese back to the era of civil wars," Amal said in a statement.

Amal, which is led by Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri, one of the most powerful political figures in the country, urged the authorities to arrest all those responsible for the violence.

The inquiry into the Aug. 4, 2020 explosion, which killed more than 200 people and devastated swathes of Beirut, has made little headway amid pushback from political factions.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati told the Al-Modon newspaper on Monday that the government would not meet unless an agreement is reached concerning the investigation.

Mikati also said he was not planning to resign at the moment. "The country can't be left in circumstances like this."

Tensions over the probe have spilt over into cabinet, with ministers aligned with the politicians the judge was seeking to question demanding his removal.



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Lebanon Maronite patriarch says no party should resort to violence
Saudi Arabia warns citizens against travel to Lebanon