

Lebanon MPs hide in fear of Hezbollah assassins

Author:

Sun, 2021-10-17 00:50

BEIRUT: Members of parliament hid in their homes on Saturday in fear of assassination by Hezbollah gunmen as new turmoil in Lebanon threatened to spiral out of control.

Security services advised MPs from the Lebanese Forces party not to venture out amid growing tension over a judicial investigation into the Beirut port explosion in August 2020, which killed more than 200 people and devastated swaths of Beirut.

“Yes, this advice was given to the MPs of the Lebanese Forces,” party media chief Charles Jabbour told Arab News. “There is fear of them being exposed to assassination and murder, which Hezbollah has practiced before. The solution requires that Hezbollah hand over its weapons to the state.”

The crisis surrounds the investigation being conducted by Judge Tarek Bitar, who wants to question former and serving ministers linked to Hezbollah and the allied Amal Party about their responsibility for the deadly port blast. The ministers claim the judge’s actions are political, and have refused to cooperate.

Tensions erupted into violence last Thursday, when seven people were killed after gunfire erupted during a Hezbollah and Amal protest against the investigation in a mainly Christian area of central Beirut.

Justice Minister Henry El-Khoury said on Saturday he supported Judge Bitar, who had the right to summon whoever he wanted in the case. “I stand by the ... investigator,” El-Khoury said. He said he did not have the authority to replace Bitar, and faced no pressure to do so.

The minister held crisis talks on Saturday to discuss the investigation with Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Supreme Judicial Council president Suhail Abboud and public prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat. They decided to invite Bitar to a meeting of the council on Tuesday.

“Judge Abboud is committed to judicial, not political, approaches to resolving the problem,” a judicial source told Arab News.

There was also support for Bitar’s investigation from a surprising source – former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Lebanon’s largest Christian bloc. “The Free Patriotic Movement is for continuing the probe, revealing the truth and putting those responsible on trial,” Bassil said on Saturday.

Bassil, who is President Michel Aoun’s son-in-law and is widely thought to be angling to replace him, is under US sanctions for alleged corruption, and for

having ties to Hezbollah.



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[Merkel vows continuity on last visit to Erdogan](#)

Sun, 2021-10-17 01:00

ISTANBUL: Chancellor Angela Merkel on Saturday vowed continuity in Germany's relations with Turkey that included both cooperation and criticism of Ankara as she paid her final visit to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Merkel and Erdogan developed complex but close relations over the German chancellor's 16-year term that navigated the perils of Turkey's tumultuous ties with the West.

Their personal bond was instrumental in helping Europe manage a refugee crisis in 2016 and calm simmering tensions in the east Mediterranean last year.

Merkel also helped iron out some of the difficulties that have crept into Erdogan's relations with Washington and French President Emmanuel Macron.

The two leaders had lunch and private talks in a presidential villa overlooking the Bosphorus on the latest leg of Merkel's parting foreign tour.

"I have always said that our collaboration was very good in the years that I worked with Mr. Erdogan," Merkel told reporters after the talks.

The 67-year-old German leader said her "advice" to Turkey today was to expect "the same thing for the coming government in Germany.

"The relationship between Turkey and Germany, with its negative and positive sides, will go on. It will be recognised by the next government," she said.

Erdogan referred to Merkel as his "dear friend" twice during the closing media event.

But he also hinted at the difficulties Turkey might have in promoting its interests after Merkel formally gives way to a new coalition government taking shape in Berlin following elections last month.

"If there had been no coalition government, (Germany's) relations with Turkey might have been easier. Of course, it is not easy to work with a coalition government," Erdogan said.

Erdogan headed Turkey as prime minister when Merkel became the first woman to head Germany in 2005.

The two have since shared a long list of differences and numerous testy exchanges on issues ranging from Turkey's crackdown on human rights to its military campaigns in Syria and Libya.

But Germany also played a central role in defusing a crisis in the east Mediterranean last year that erupted when Turkey began searching for natural gas in disputed waters claimed by Cyprus and Greece.

Analysts say Merkel was more sympathetic to Erdogan's position because of the presence of an estimated 3 million ethnic Turks in Germany.

She has also been sensitive to Erdogan's threats to let an estimated 5 million migrants and refugees temporarily living in Turkey under a 2016 deal with the EU to leave for Europe unless Ankara's interests are respected by Brussels.

After admitting hundreds of thousands of refugees to Germany in 2015, she stressed Turkey's role in preventing a repeat of such large-scale migration to Europe and helped engineer a deal for Turkey to stem the flow of people seeking to cross the Aegean Sea.

“Their relations were very difficult in many respects but they managed to establish and maintain working cooperation,” analyst Gunter Seufert of the German Institute for Security and International Affairs told AFP.

Seufert predicted that the new German government will be more “sceptical” about extending the terms of the Turkey-EU agreement on migrants or continuing arms sales to Ankara – particularly submarines.

“With the new chancellor, no matter who they will be ... it will be more difficult to coordinate the European policy with Turkey to the level and degree Angela Merkel did.”



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Germany's Merkel tells Israel not to 'lose sight' of deal with Palestinians

[Sudan prime minister announces steps to move out of political crisis](#)

Author:

Sun, 2021-10-17 00:47

CAIRO: Sudan's prime minister has announced a series of steps for his country's transition to democracy less than a month after a coup attempt rocked its leadership.

In a speech, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok called the coup attempt an "alarm bell" that should awaken people to the causes of the country's political and economic challenges.

"The serious political crisis that we are living in right now, I would not be exaggerating to say, is the worst and most dangerous crisis that not only threatens the transition, but threatens our whole country," he said.

Authorities announced the coup attempt by a group of soldiers on Sept. 22, saying that it had failed. They blamed supporters of the country's former autocrat Omar Bashir for planning the takeover.

It underscored the fragility of Sudan's path to democracy, more than two years after the military's overthrow of Bashir amid a massive public uprising against his three-decade rule. Sudan has since been ruled by an interim, joint civilian-military government.

Months after Bashir's toppling, the ruling generals agreed to share power with civilians representing the protest movement.

But tensions between the civilians and generals in the transitional government have increased since the foiled coup attempt within the military.

There is wide-scale mistrust of the military leaders among the protest movement, and tens of thousands have taken to the street in the past two years to call for an immediate handover of power to civilians.

Earlier this month, the Sudanese Professionals Association, which spearheaded the nationwide uprising that kicked off in December 2018, said the interim government must end its power-sharing agreement with the military council. Their call then for demonstrations brought thousands more to the streets.

Hamdok said Friday that the root issues behind the political crisis have long been there, in an attempt to bring all parties back to the table for talks. He laid out a series of measures that he said would help speed the handover to a completely elected and civilian government.

They included repeated exhortations for groups of differing opinions to work together, and for the country's transitional constitution and judicial bodies to be respected.

"This crisis was not created today, it did not descend upon us from the sky, and it did not surprise us at all," he said of the recent political turmoil.



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[How viable is the Kurds' autonomous territory in northeast Syria?](#)

Sat, 2021-10-16 21:18

MISSOURI, USA: Ilham Ahmed, head of the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has been lobbying Moscow and Washington to support Kurdish representation in the long-stalled, UN-backed Syrian peace process.

Ahmed, who has visited both capitals in recent weeks, also wants the country's Kurdish-run region to be exempted from sanctions imposed under the 2019 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, the US legislation that sanctioned the regime of President Bashar Assad for war crimes against the Syrian people.

But what are the Syrian Kurds hoping for, precisely, and how viable are their proposals?

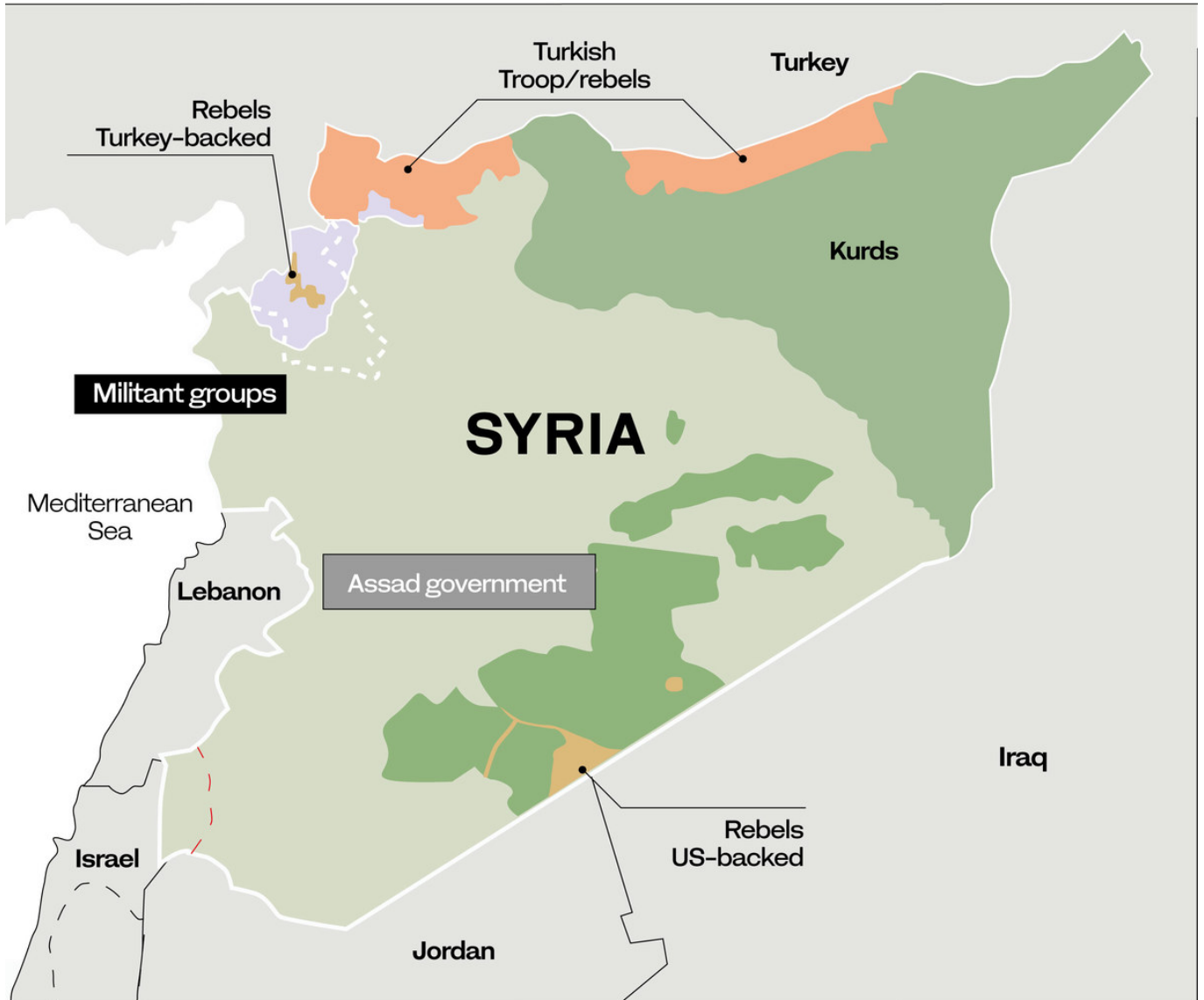
Russian jets, Iran-backed fighters, Turkish-supported insurgents, Islamist

radicals, US troops and Syrian government forces, as well as the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), operate across the patchwork of territories that constitute northern Syria.

The US views the YPG as a key ally in the fight against Daesh in northeastern Syria while Russia has forces in the area to support President Assad.

THE SITUATION IN SYRIA

Map showing who controls what region



Source: Jane's Conflict Monitor, The Economist

ARAB NEWS

While some media outlets reported that Ahmed, as the president of the executive committee of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), was lobbying for American or Russian support for the creation of a breakaway state, the Syrian Kurds are not actually pushing for such a maximalist goal.

The Syrian Kurdish parties are sympathetic to the ideology of jailed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan. They say they reject nationalism, secession and statism in general, in line with Ocalan's post-2001 writings.

At the same time, however, Syrian Kurdish organizations appear to be establishing all the trappings of their own separate state in the territory they control.

Their military forces – including the SDF, the YPG and the YPJ, the YPG's all-female militia – are working assiduously to establish and maintain their monopoly on the use of force in the northeast.

They have clashed not only with Turkish forces and various Islamist extremist groups in the area, but also on occasion with Kurdish armed groups, the military forces of the Assad regime, Free Syrian Army rebels and others.



A member of the Kurdish internal security services known as Asayish stands guard during a demonstration by Syrian Kurds against the Turkish assault on northeastern Syria and in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in Syria's northeastern city of Qamishli. (AFP/File Photo)

Competing political parties in the territories under their control have likewise faced pressure, or outright bans, as the SDC and its ally, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), seek to bring everyone under the same institutional and governing structures that they created and dominate.

In some ways the Kurds of the SDC and PYD have proven to be very liberal, happily welcoming Arab tribes, Christians, Yezidis, Armenians, Turkmen and other groups and ethnicities into their ranks and governing structures.

However, they appear much less accepting and tolerant of those who seek to operate outside of the "democratic autonomy" political umbrella they have

established.

With their own security forces, political institutions, schools and a variety of party-established civil-society organizations, it does at times look as though the Syrian Kurds are intent on creating their own separate state. But what choice did they have after the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011?

The Assad regime had brutally repressed Kurds for decades prior to the war. After Assad withdrew his forces and much of the Syrian government's personnel from northeast Syria early in the conflict, to focus on the western and southern parts of the country where the rebel threat appeared the greatest, someone had to fill the resultant vacuum.



Syrian Kurdish women carry party flags, as they take part in a rally in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the People's Protection Forces. (AFP/File Photo)

PKK-aligned Syrian Kurdish groups moved in to defend the area against Daesh and other extremist groups that were trying to take over. They fought extremely hard against the radical Islamists, handing Daesh its first defeat, in Kobani in 2014.

Freed from the regime's iron grip for the first time in their lives, the Kurds seized the opportunity to establish Kurdish and other minority-language programs, cultural centers, schools and institutions.

Fearing the malign "divide and conquer" tactics of neighboring powers, the new Syrian Kurdish authorities rejected attempts by other Kurdish parties, particularly those under the influence of Iraqi Kurdistan's regional

government, and Arab rebel groups to establish competing parties and militias in their hard-won territory.

Authorities in Turkey, meanwhile, were concerned by what they saw as an emerging PKK-controlled proto-state on their southern border. Through three military incursions in the last five years that displaced hundreds of thousands of ethnic Kurds, Ankara seized hundreds of kilometers of the border strip and pushed around 30 km into northern Syria.

In 2018, Moscow appeared to greenlight the Turkish invasion of Afrin, which at the time was under SDF/YPG/PYD control, withdrawing its troops and allowing Turkish jets to operate in air space previously controlled by Russia.



Woman watch from a rooftop as US troops patrol in 2020 along the streets of the Syrian town of Al-Jawadiyah and meet the inhabitants, in the northeastern Hasakeh province, near the border with Turkey. (AFP/File Photo)

The following year, Washington appeared to do the same, withdrawing US troops from the Tal Abyad area on the border with Turkey just before the Turkish invasion.

These incursions have left the Syrian Kurdish administration in a serious bind. Without American support and the presence of a token US tripwire force, Turkey could well expand its area of control in northern Syria.

Just this week, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey was determined to eliminate alleged threats originating in northern Syria and that a suspected YPG attack that killed two Turkish police officers in Azaz was “the final

straw.”

Meanwhile, the Assad regime appears uninterested in any proposals for a “more decentralized Syrian state” in which parts of the northeast would remain nominally a part of the state but actually fall under Syrian Kurdish control.

Ahmed’s recent diplomatic forays have therefore focused on Moscow and Washington. In the former, the Syrian Kurds hope to convince the Russians to cajole the Assad regime into some sort of a compromise that would safeguard as much autonomy in northeastern Syria as possible. In the latter they aim to secure a US commitment not to abandon them again.



Cars drive past election campaign billboards depicting Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, a candidate for the upcoming presidential vote, in the capital Damascus, on May 24, 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

Ahmed outlined her hopes during a conference hosted by the Washington Institute on Sept. 29.

“The Syrian Democratic Council seeks a lasting political solution to the conflict, advocating internal dialogue and, ultimately, political and cultural decentralization that respects the country’s diversity and bolsters economic development,” she said.

“Continued support from our partner, the US, is crucial to this mission. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria faces numerous obstacles, including insecurity, poverty, foreign intervention, and terrorism.

“In addition, the Geneva peace process and constitutional process have

stalled. The US could help alleviate these issues in the pursuit of a more stable Syria free of despotism, proxy conflicts and terror.”

America’s chaotic exit from Afghanistan in August undoubtedly will have unnerved Syrian Kurds already apprehensive about their own future. Assad, Turkey and Daesh would all welcome a similar US withdrawal from northeastern Syria.

It is unlikely the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria,” the governing body of which is the SDC, would be able to hold up against such combined pressures.



US troops patrol along the streets of the Syrian town of Al-Jawadiyah.
(AFP/File Photo)

However, the botched American withdrawal from Afghanistan might actually work in Syrian Kurds’ favor, as the Biden administration will probably try to avoid a similar embarrassment in Syria any time soon.

Following meetings in Washington last month with representatives of the White House, State Department and Pentagon, Ahmed seems to have received a reassuring response.

“They (the Americans) promised to do whatever it takes to destroy Islamic State (Daesh) and work to build infrastructure in northeastern Syria,” she told the Reuters news agency. “They said they are going to stay in Syria and will not withdraw – they will keep fighting Islamic State.”

She added: “Before, they were unclear under Trump and during the Afghan

withdrawal, but this time they made everything clear.”

With no change of attitudes in Damascus or Ankara, the Syrian Kurds are left with little choice but to continue to rely on the American presence, cooperation and support. At best, they can extend the status quo and the longevity of their precarious autonomy.

If they can convince Washington and Russia to help them reopen the crossings on the border with Iraq, exempt them from the sanctions designed to target the Assad regime, and allow the delivery of international aid directly to their enclave, rather than being routed through Damascus with the result that it rarely reaches the northeast, then the political and economic situation will improve.

Without a more durable political solution on the horizon, this is probably the best the Syrian Kurds can hope for.

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[Thousands of pro-military protesters rally against Sudan government](#)

Author:

AFP

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Sat, 2021-10-16 15:35

KHARTOUM: Thousands of pro-military Sudanese protesters took to the streets Saturday demanding the dissolution of the transitional government, saying it had "failed" them politically and economically.

The protests came as Sudanese politics reels from divisions among the factions steering the rocky transition from two decades of iron-fisted rule by Omar Al-Bashir, who was ousted by the army in April 2019 in the face of mass protests.

Saturday's demonstrations were organized by a splinter faction of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a civilian alliance which spearheaded the anti-Bashir protests and became a key plank of the transition.

"We need a military government, the current government has failed to bring us justice and equality," said Abboud Ahmed, a 50-year-old protester near the presidential palace in central Khartoum.

The official SUNA news agency reported that protesters had traveled in by truck from Khartoum's outskirts and from neighboring states.

Critics alleged that the protests involved sympathizers of the Bashir regime, which was dominated by Islamists and the military.

Banners called for the "dissolution of the government." Protesters chanted "one army, one people" and "the army will bring us bread."

"We are marching in a peaceful protest and we want a military government," said housewife Enaam Mohamed.

On Friday, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok warned that the transition is facing its "worst and most dangerous" crisis.

The mainstream faction of the FFC said: "The current crisis is not related to dissolution of the government of not.

"It is engineered by some parties to overthrow the revolutionary forces... paving the way for the return of remnants of the previous regime."

Support for the transitional government has waned in recent months in the

face of a tough package of IMF-backed economic reforms, including the slashing of fuel subsidies and a managed float of the Sudanese pound. Protests have rocked eastern Sudan where demonstrators have blocked trade through the key hub of Port Sudan since September. On September 21, the government said it thwarted a coup attempt which it blamed on both military officers and civilians linked to Bashir's regime.





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Sudan security service slaps travel ban on top civilian politicians Sudan to return to economic growth, forecasts finance minister