

# Tunisian labor union urges new PM appointment to ease crisis

Author:

Tue, 2021-08-03 23:45

TUNIS: Tunisia's powerful labor union urged the president on Tuesday to rapidly announce a new government that should be small and led by an experienced premier, after he seized executive control in a move his opponents called a coup.

President Kais Saied has defended his actions as constitutional and said he will govern alongside a new prime minister during an emergency period, but nine days after his intervention, he has yet to name one.

"We can't wait 30 days for the announcement of a government," said Sami Tahri, a spokesman for the UGTT union, one of Tunisia's most powerful political forces.

UGTT chief Nouredine Taboubi said later on state television later on Tuesday that the cabinet should be small and headed by somebody with experience, sending a positive message to both Tunisians and international lenders.

"We must speed up the formation of the government to be able to face economic and health challenges," he said.

Saied's sudden intervention on July 25 appeared to have widespread public support but raised fears for the future of the democratic system that Tunisia adopted after its 2011 revolution that triggered the Arab Spring.

On Tuesday Saied removed Tunisia's ambassador to Washington, the latest in a string of dismissals of senior and mid-ranking officials over the past week including several ministers. He did not immediately name a replacement.

He is also still to announce a roadmap to end an emergency period that he initially set at one month but later announced could be two months.

A source close to the presidential palace in Carthage said earlier that Saied might announce the new premier on Tuesday. Sources have told Reuters that Central Bank Governor Marouane Abassi and two former finance ministers, Hakim Hammouda and Nizar Yaich, are contenders.

Saied's most powerful organized opponent, the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, has meanwhile been riven by internal splits over its response to the crisis and its longer-term strategy and leadership.

Tunisians had over the past decade grown ever more frustrated by economic stagnation, corruption and bickering among a political class that often seemed more focused on its own narrow interests than on national problems.

The coronavirus pandemic ripped through Tunisia over the past two months as

the state vaccination effort crawled, leading at one point to the worst infection and death rates in Africa. Pandemic counter-measures last year hammered the economy.

On Monday Saied replaced the finance, agriculture and telecoms ministers after having said last week that “wrong economic choices” had cost the country.

On Sunday he said there were contacts with “friendly countries” for financial assistance. (Reporting by Tarek Amara, writing by Angus McDowall; Editing by William Maclean and Mark Heinrich)



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Tunisia leader fires ambassador to US in rash of dismissals  
Tunisians hope for better times ahead

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# Tunisia leader fires ambassador to US in rash of dismissals

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

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Tue, 2021-08-03 23:51

TUNIS, Tunisia: A day after naming a new economy minister, President Kais Saied on Tuesday added Tunisia's ambassador to the United States to a rash of dismissals.

Yet he has to say who will replace the prime minister he fired less than two weeks ago or when.

Saied, who took on executive powers July 25 and began ruling by decree, has also undertaken globe-spanning consultations, meeting Tuesday with the foreign minister of Egypt, a critical ally in the Middle East.

Local polls say there is large support for Saied's controversial actions, which importantly included freezing Tunisia's parliament,

The North African country has been cementing its democracy since chasing out its former autocratic ruler a decade ago, triggering the Arab Spring. Tunisia is the only success story to emerge from those chaotic times, and allies, from the United States to Europe and the Middle East, have worried about what comes next.

Tunisia is coping with economic, social and health crises, with the coronavirus pandemic overwhelming its hospitals. Saied, using an article in the constitution that allows a president to step in under grave circumstances, has said he did so to save the country.

In his meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukry, the president highlighted "the correlation between Egypt's and Tunisia's security and stability," the official TAP news agency said.

Egypt's envoy said that Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi backed Saied's moves with "his full support for the historic steps" of the Tunisian leader, TAP added. "Egypt and Tunisia are working together to ensure stability not only in the two countries, but also across the region," the agency quoted the foreign minister as saying after the meeting.

The important Economy Ministry got a new acting minister Monday, with the dismissal of Ali Kooli, as did the Communications Technology ministry.

The rash of firings that began when Saied assumed all executive power continued Tuesday. Tunisia's ambassador to Washington, Nejmeddine Lakhal, was the latest dignitary terminated, the official news agency said. No explanation was given. Also Tuesday, the president fired the governor of the important Sfax region in eastern Tunisia.

Some lawmakers have not been spared, snared by judicial officials on complaints that could not be prosecuted earlier. The president lifted the immunity of the parliamentary body when he took on all powers, and a handful have been summoned to answer to charges they had escaped.



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## [\*\*Egyptian president calls on religious scholars to confront platforms that broadcast false ideas about Islam\*\*](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-08-03 21:58

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, on Tuesday, called on religious scholars in the country to confront electronic platforms spreading false ideas that distort the essence of Islam and exploit religion to achieve political goals through acts of terrorism.

Presidential Spokesman Bassam Radi said that El-Sisi met the delegation participating in the international conference “Fatwa Institutions in the Digital Age,” organized by the Egyptian Dar Al-Ifta.

The spokesman said that the president emphasized the need for the world’s fatwa institutions to keep pace with digital developments, especially regarding social media, and address electronic platforms that broadcast ideas that could “confuse the essence of the true Islamic religion.”

“The meeting stressed the importance of correcting religious discourse at the level of individuals, groups and countries,” he said. “El-Sisi reviewed the important role played by ancient religious institutions in Egypt, represented by the Dar Al-Ifta, Al-Azhar Al-Sharif and the Ministry of Endowments.”

Radi referred to the mission as a “fundamental task” that would necessitate the combined efforts of “all religious scholars, including muftis, imams and preachers.”

At the opening of the conference, Shawki Allam, Egypt’s grand mufti, praised the “moderate national religious institutions in Egypt” for taking a strong stance and confronting the danger of extremism, which has “caused great harm to the world” and “worked to invade young minds.”

“Our jihad for the sake of God Almighty was to speak the truth,” he said, referencing the efforts to counter extremist ideology. “We have launched digital platforms and held continuous training programs.”



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## Yemen government troops make limited advances in Marib province

Author:

Tue, 2021-08-03 21:39

ALEXANDRIA: Yemeni Army troops on Tuesday scored limited advances in the province of Marib as the president warned that the Iran-backed Houthis are destroying the country and threatening regional and international security.

Yemen's Defense Ministry said that its troops and allied tribesmen liberated a mountain in Al-Mushairef area, in the south of Marib province, after launching an attack on the Houthis.

At least 14 Houthis were killed and many others wounded during clashes on Al-Bayadh mountain. The rebels were forced to flee the battlefield, leaving behind the bodies of their dead comrades and weapons, the ministry added.

Warplanes from the Arab coalition carried out several sorties, targeting Houthi military reinforcements arriving from Al-Bayda province, killing many fighters and destroying military vehicles.

Forces from the internationally recognized government have recently purged the Houthis from another "strategic" mountain in southern Marib province. By seizing control of the two mountains, loyalists have further secured the region from Houthi attacks.

Despite their gains in the south, government troops have continued battling relentless attacks from the Houthis west of the city of Marib, with no confirmed gains for both sides.

Local media reports said the Arab coalition on Tuesday intensified air raids on Houthi targets in Al-Mashjah and Al-Kasara, both west of Marib, as the rebels pressed ahead with deadly attacks on government forces in an attempt to break months of stalemate.

Over the last six months, the Houthis have stepped up their attacks against government forces with the aim of seizing control of the strategic city of Marib, the Yemeni government's last bastion in the northern half of the country.

Yemeni Army commanders said that thousands of Houthis have been killed or

wounded in the fierce fighting, adding that loyalist forces halted their advance to Marib.

Government forces in the western province of Hodeidah on Tuesday shot down a Houthi explosive-rigged drone over Beit Al-Faqih district as other loyalist elements sporadically traded mortar fire with the Houthis in flashpoints in the province, the Giants Brigades media reported.

Yemen President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi warned that the Houthi “destructive and aggressive” policies – such as detonating opponents’ houses and attacks on civilians – are ruining the country and causing fractures in its social fabric. Hadi vows to defeat the rebels. During an “exceptional” meeting with his deputy, Ahmed Mohsen Al-Ahmer and Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed in Riyadh on Monday evening, Hadi said the Houthi planting of sea mines and their attacks on ships in the Red Sea show that they pose a threat to international maritime navigation. He also thanked the Arab coalition for military and humanitarian assistance to Yemenis.

The Yemeni Landmine Monitor said on Tuesday that landmines planted by the Houthis in various liberated areas had recently killed 18 civilians, including 10 children and five women. The blasts wounded 32 others, including seven children and two women, over April, May and June.

On Monday, a man was killed and two more wounded when his vehicle ran over an anti-tank mine planted by the Houthis in Al-Dhahyah village in Hays district, south of Hodeidah province. Last week, another landmine planted by the Houthis killed three civilians and wounded 11 in Hodeidah’s Al-Durihimi district, the monitor said.



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## [Why the trauma does not end for Beirut blast survivors](#)

Tue, 2021-08-03 20:47

BEIRUT: A year after narrowly avoiding death, Hadi's heart still races when he hears sudden loud noises. The 27-year-old was lucky to survive when, on Aug. 4, 2020, a huge cache of ammonium nitrate ignited inside a warehouse at the Port of Beirut, close to his home in the Mar Mikhael neighborhood.

At least 217 people were killed, more than 6,500 injured, and at least 300,000 left homeless by the resultant blast, which devastated Lebanon's main port. It was equivalent to the force of 1.1 kilotons of TNT and caused damage to buildings up to 20 kilometers away.

Despite promising the victims and their families that justice would be swift, Lebanese authorities are yet to hold anyone accountable.

# BEIRUT BLAST INVESTIGATION

Lebanese officials accused of deliberately obstructing accountability for Aug. 4, 2020, explosion



"It was fight or flight after the explosion," Hadi, who declined to give his full name, told Arab News in advance of the first anniversary of the blast.

"I packed whatever I could find. In my mind this was the first bomb out of hundreds more to come – and if this was the first one, God knows what was coming."

After scrambling out of his apartment block with whatever he could carry, Hadi found the surrounding streets he knew so well were damaged beyond recognition.

"The sights I saw that day after leaving the building were absolutely petrifying," he said. "People lying on rugs, gushing blood. Some without arms, some without legs, scarred all over, as people were trying to help them. Cars in the middle of the road, destroyed, gasoline leaking on the streets. No one understood what was going on."

## **INNUMBERS**

- \* **300,000 – People left homeless.**
- \* **70,000 – Jobs lost after the explosion.**
- \* **163 – Schools destroyed.**
- \* **6 – Hospitals destroyed.**
- \* **0 – Number of people sentenced over blast.**

*Source: UN*

Thousands of Beirut residents share similar traumatic memories of a day that was the bloodiest and most devastating since the civil war. The explosion, which was so powerful it was felt in Cyprus, more than 200km away, was one of the biggest non-nuclear blasts in history.

The world was horrified by images and video footage on social media and news broadcasts that showed the scale of the damage caused by the shock wave that rocked the city, the destruction in the streets, and the dirty-pink mushroom cloud hanging over the city.

Among the youngest victims were two-year-old Isaac Oehlers and three-year-old Alexandra Naggear. But equally tragic is the number of lives the explosion continues to claim indirectly.

"We continue to hear about people losing their lives to suicide every day, and we continue to be overwhelmed with requests for psychological support, with an ongoing waiting list of 70 to 100 patients in our clinics every month," Mia Atoui, a clinical psychologist and co-founder of Embrace, a nonprofit organization dedicated to mental health, told Arab News.



A wounded man receives help outside a hospital following the explosion.  
(AFP/File Photo)

A year after the blast, Embrace's public helpline, called National Lifeline, is receiving more than 1,100 calls each month. Staff at its free clinic conduct more than 500 mental health consultations a month.

"It has indeed been a turbulent year," Atoui said. "There is a collective sense of depression and anxiety among every person you meet and talk to. People are down, worried, hopeless, helpless, despaired and unable to enjoy any of life's pleasures."

The aftermath of the Beirut explosion is just one of a multitude of overlapping crises blighting a country wracked by an ongoing economic crisis, mass unemployment, a fresh wave of coronavirus infections, and shortages of fuel and electricity – all of which is made worse by seemingly endless political paralysis.

Lebanon has been experiencing a socio-economic implosion since 2019. In the autumn of that year, nationwide protests erupted over rampant corruption among the political class that has ruled the country since the end of the civil war under a sectarian banner.



On August 4, 2021 Lebanon will mark the first anniversary of the devastating port blast that thundered through the city, levelling entire neighbourhoods, killing more than 200 people and wounding 6,500 others. (AFP/File Photo)

Public anger grew when an economic meltdown caused the nation's currency to lose 90 percent of its value and the banks held depositors' money hostage. Thousands of young people have fled abroad. Those who remain struggle to get by, often turning for help to a flourishing black market.

But the trauma caused by the port explosion and its aftermath has been compounded by the failure of the government to move forward with its investigation into the disaster.

"The lack of accountability is triggering on all fronts," Atoui said. "It not only leaves our wounds open, it reinforces the idea that our lives don't matter, that the lives of our loved ones we have lost don't matter and are of no value. It means that we cannot feel safe or secure again.

"It threatens our existence, both present and future, and there is nothing more painful, more distressing and more overwhelming to our quality of life than the sense of injustice and living in an unjust world where your rights are robbed."



UGC footage filmed from an office building shows a fireball exploding while smoke is billowing during the chemical explosion at the port. (AFP/Mouafac Harb/Handout/File Photo)

The Lebanon Relief Network, a digital platform launched after the blast to help individuals affected by it to connect with trauma experts and therapists, considers the failure to deliver justice and accountability a recipe for long-term mental illness.

“The lack of accountability reduces trust in communities and has a significant negative effect on mental health. This is clearly exacerbated in times of crisis,” the network said in a statement to Arab News.

The FBI reportedly estimated that about 552 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded inside the Beirut port warehouse on August 4, much less than the 2,754 tons that arrived on a Russian-leased cargo ship in 2013. The Reuters news agency said the FBI report did not give any explanation for the discrepancy, or where the rest of the shipment might have gone.

Amnesty International, the international rights-advocacy group, has accused Lebanese authorities of “shamelessly obstructing victims’ quest for truth and justice” in the months since the blast, actively shielding officials from scrutiny and hampering the course of the investigation.



An aerial view shows the massive damage at Beirut port's grain silos and the area around it, one day after the explosion. (AFP/File Photo)

In February, Lebanese authorities dismissed the first judge appointed to lead the investigation after he summoned political figures for questioning. So far they have rejected requests by his replacement to lift the immunity granted to officials, and to question senior members of the security forces.

Leaked official documents indicate that Lebanese customs officials, military and security chiefs, and members of the judiciary warned successive governments about the danger posed by the stockpile of explosive chemicals at the port on at least 10 occasions during the six years it was stored at the port, yet no action was taken.

MPs and officials are clinging to their right to immunity, effectively shielding suspects whose actions are blamed for causing the explosion, and denying thousands of victims the justice they demand.

## **FASTFACTS**

**\* Victims of the blast have seen little accountability, despite promises that justice would be swift.**

**\* The blast killed more than 200 people, injured 6,500 and made at least 300,000 homeless.**

“Lebanese authorities promised a swift investigation; instead they have brazenly blocked and stalled justice at every turn, despite a tireless campaign for justice and criminal accountability by survivors and families of

victims,” said Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty International’s deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

“The Lebanese government tragically failed to protect the lives of its people, just as it has failed for so long to protect basic socioeconomic rights. In blocking the judge’s attempts to summon political officials, the authorities have struck yet another blow to the people of Lebanon. Given the scale of this tragedy, it is astounding to see how far the Lebanese authorities are prepared to go to shield themselves from scrutiny.”

According to a report this year by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Regional Program Political Dialogue and Regional Integration South Mediterranean, Lebanon ranks lowest in the MENA region in terms of public trust in the national government, parliament, prime minister, head of state and local government – all of which are rated below 28 percent.

In the absence of trusted government institutions, civil-society groups have been forced to step in to address the widespread mental trauma caused by the explosion, and to feed and provide new homes for people who lost everything.



Wounded people, just a few of the estimated 6,500 who were injured in the explosion, are pictured outside a hospital following the blast. (AFP/File Photo)

“People are asking for different kinds of support, but many right now have asked for support to deal with the trauma of the blast – many are seeking support for the first time, one year after the traumatic event,” Atoui said.

“This reinforces the fact that the long-term effects of the blast will

persist for many years and that the healing process is a long journey. Many people will need ongoing support.”

Hadi, the Beirut resident, said he returned to the Mar Mikhael neighborhood only once after the blast, to salvage what remained of his possessions. He now lives in a part of the city far away from the port and anything that could trigger him.

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*Twitter:* [@Tarek\\_AliAhmad](https://twitter.com/Tarek_AliAhmad)





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Lebanese authorities 'criminally negligent' over Beirut blast, Watchdog says