

# Lebanon govt hopes collapse amid heated exchanges

Author:

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BEIRUT: Efforts to form a government and end the political stalemate gripping Lebanon reached a dead-end on Wednesday amid heated exchanges between President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

After Aoun's political team, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), an ally of Hezbollah, announced that it had rejected Berri's initiative to form a new government, the parliamentary speaker responded with a strongly worded statement accusing the Lebanese president of doing "what he has no constitutional right to do" by insisting on the blocking third in the government.

Aoun has demanded a third of all Cabinet seats, effectively giving his team veto power over government decisions.

Berri said that he had put forward the initiative "to help the Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri," and accused Aoun of backing out of a pledge to support the formation of a new government.

"The president has no constitutional right to even one minister. He does not participate in voting, so how can he indirectly have votes?" Berri asked.

"The country is collapsing, institutions are deteriorating, and the people are suffering," he added.

Addressing Aoun, the parliamentary speaker said: "You openly say that you do not want Hariri as prime minister. This is not your right; the decision to assign him is not yours, and the Parliament has voiced its decision loud and clear."

In response, Aoun's office issued a statement criticizing "statements and positions from various officials interfering in the process of forming a government."

The statement also highlighted what it claimed were "abuses and direct targeting of the powers of the president."

With hopes of a new government dashed, government and private sector trade unions called for a strike on Thursday to rescue Lebanon from the political deadlock and threat of economic collapse.

According to political observers, Aoun's team prefers to keep the caretaker government in place to allow the country's affairs to be run by the Baabda Palace and through the Supreme Defense Council, chaired by Aoun.

MP Mohammed Al-Hajjar told Arab News: "We are going through a very difficult

stage. The president and the FPM do not value the constitution and are insisting on obstructing the formation of the government, taking the Lebanese people hostage for their personal interests.”

He said that it is clear Aoun and his political team want a government that is subject to their decisions until presidential elections are held.

Al-Hajjar said that Hezbollah “is standing idly by and this is unacceptable.”

He added that Hezbollah could “facilitate the formation of the government by putting pressure on its ally, but it has another agenda.”

Meanwhile, Charles Jabbour, head of the Lebanese Forces’ Media and Communication Service, said that while Hezbollah wants to protect its ally Aoun and his political team, the FPM is dissatisfied with Hezbollah’s position.

“This was revealed by direct statements made by FPM officials against Hezbollah,” he said.

Jabbour said that Hezbollah is “no longer a major force in this field. It is politically paralyzed and unable to do anything.”

However, he voiced concerns that the political impasse would worsen.

“There is a struggle over power and political positions, and cooperation with Aoun’s team is impossible,” he said.



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## [Yemenis demand end to Houthi siege of Taiz as part of peace plans](#)

Wed, 2021-06-16 20:30

ALEXANDRIA: Yemen human rights activists, politicians, journalists, and residents of Taiz have demanded that government and international mediators include the lifting of the city's siege by Iran-backed Houthis in any peace initiative to end the war in the country.

Fearing being shut out of the current UN-brokered peace initiative that largely focused on Sanaa, residents of the besieged southern Yemeni city and human rights activists said the Houthis should stop their military operations and continued shelling of the city's densely populated districts under any deal to bring the conflict to a close.

In a tweet as part of an online campaign to focus world attention on the Taiz siege, Yemeni activist Abdullah Al-Sharabe said: "Ending the siege of Taiz unconditionally is the demand of all Yemenis, and no one opposes this human desire except the Houthi criminals who imposed the siege."

According to Yemeni and UN officials, and Western diplomats, the UN-brokered peace initiative calls for an immediate nationwide ceasefire, the reopening of Sanaa airport, the lifting of restrictions on Hodeidah port, and the resumption of peace talks between the Yemeni government and the Houthis.

But Taiz residents claim too much focus has been placed on easing restrictions in Houthi-controlled areas without including the Houthi siege as one of the peace conditions.

However, UN Yemen envoy spokeswoman, Ismini Palla, told Arab News that the Houthis would lift their siege of Taiz at the same time as the warring factions put into place a ceasefire.

"The proposed nationwide ceasefire in that plan aims not only to halt all forms of fighting but also result in the opening of main roads connecting the country from north to south, including Taiz, for the free movement of civilians, commercial goods, and humanitarian aid," she said.

The Yemeni government said it would not agree to any peace plan that did not include lifting the siege of Taiz and removing Houthi checkpoints from Yemeni cities.

“Opening roads, ensuring freedom of movement for citizens, and lifting the siege on cities, especially the city of Taiz, are among the basic issues that the government puts at the forefront of its priorities,” the Yemeni Foreign Ministry said.

Facing stiff resistance from army troops and resistance fighters in the city, the Houthis have imposed a siege on Taiz, Yemen’s third-largest city, since early 2015, in the process disrupting the distribution of vital humanitarian and medical assistance to thousands of hungry residents and turning a deaf ear to international calls to lift the blockade.

At the same time, the group has reportedly deployed snipers near its checkpoints to shoot any residents trying to enter or leave government-controlled areas of the city.

Speaking to Arab News from Taiz, Aqmar, a housewife, said people had been forced to use dangerous and unpaved roads to get food and medicines into the city and that the Houthi siege had pushed up transportation fares and exacerbated the suffering of the people.

“We travel only when there is an extreme necessity as bus fares are between 10,000 Yemeni rials (\$40) and 15,000 rials per passenger,” she added.

She pointed out that over the years the siege had gone on, the Houthis had clamped down on freedoms of movement and that her sick grandmother who lived in a rural area outside of Taiz had died while on her way to the city to receive medical treatment.

Local rights groups claim Houthi shelling of the city has killed and wounded thousands of civilians over the past six years. Taiz Human Rights Center has put the civilian death toll from Houthi missile and artillery strikes at 1,462, including 443 children and 180 women, with 8,996 people left wounded.



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Yemeni army opens new front in Taiz, makes 'great gains' against Houthis  
Yemeni army kills 18 Houthi militants in an ambush near Taiz

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## [Why Egypt's Hamas policy changed after Israeli-Gaza conflict](#)

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Wed, 2021-06-16 18:45

GAZA CITY: During the recent Israeli conflict with Gaza, a shift in Egyptian policy was evident in President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's pledge of half a billion dollars to rebuild the besieged enclave.

The unprecedented visit of the head of the Egyptian General Intelligence

Service, Abbas Kamel, to Gaza, as an official envoy of El-Sisi, came as a major indication of the change in Cairo's policy toward Hamas.

The relationship deteriorated following the overthrow of former Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, in 2013. Egypt played a key role in brokering a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas on May 21 following 11 days of cross-border fighting last month that left a trail of destruction with more than 250 dead and hundreds wounded.

Cairo opened the Rafah crossing to dozens of Egyptian vehicles that entered Gaza to remove the rubble of destroyed buildings and pave the way for the reconstruction process. In addition, Cairo is also supplying goods to Gaza in light of strict Israeli restrictions.

However, Mukhaimer Abu Saada, professor of political science at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, differentiates between the Egyptian policy toward Gaza and the official Egyptian relationship with Hamas.

He said Egypt's role in Gaza is strategic due to the factors of history and geography. As for the country's relationship with Hamas, it falls within the framework of "political tactics" to serve both sides.

Abu Saada believes the shift that appeared in the Egyptian policy toward Gaza rulers Hamas would not have taken place "without the green light from the US administration" following American President Joe Biden's first phone call to El-Sisi.

"Egypt and Hamas are beneficiaries of this transformation," Abu Saada told Arab News.

"Hamas, which has suffered greatly politically and financially after the years of estrangement that followed the overthrow of the late President Mursi, is keen to develop its relationship with the Egyptian regime."

As for Egypt, Abu Saada said, it adheres to its position as a major regional player in the Palestinian arena, being the historical sponsor of Palestinian issues.

At the same time, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is not completely satisfied with the current Egyptian policy toward Gaza and the country's openness to Hamas, he said, adding that this may be one of the main reasons behind the dialogue setback that was supposed to be launched in Cairo last Saturday.

"The PA, which has sought over the past four years to besiege Hamas politically and financially by imposing sanctions on Gaza, does not want Hamas to exploit the recent Israeli conflict in its favor through the Egyptian gate," Abu Saada said.

Following Mursi's ouster, the Hamas-Egypt ties deteriorated to the point that it was suggested in the Egyptian media that Hamas has supported the Salafists in Sinai and helped them carry out attacks in Cairo.

Ibrahim Al-Madhoun, a political analyst close to Hamas, believes that Egypt has a great opportunity to regain its regional weight. He also thinks Hamas is ready to identify with the Egyptian side if its demands are met, especially the lifting of the siege on Gaza and the cessation of Israeli attacks on Jerusalem.

Al-Madhoun does not see Egypt making a U-turn on Hamas, but he says it has raised the degree of its interest, concentration, and ability to move in vital files.

Hani Al-Basous, professor of political science and international relations, said the current Egyptian tactic with Hamas is based on recognizing it as a fait accompli. He said the Palestinian force has great weight, gained popular

Arab momentum after the latest conflict, and it should be dealt with with new mechanisms and not with a new political orientation.



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Egyptian actress Amina Khalil announced as United Nations Population Fund honorary ambassador

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## [Italian, Tunisian presidents meet to discuss immigration](#)

Wed, 2021-06-16 18:55

ROME: As the illegal migrant situation in the Mediterranean Sea continues to escalate – nearly 2,000 people have landed on the island of Lampedusa since Sunday – the presidents from Italy and Tunisia met in Rome to work on a

solution.

Security policies “are necessary to fight against human trafficking”, but at the same time “conditions for development must be created in Africa so that people there do not feel compelled to risk their lives and emigrate to look for work or escape hunger,” Italian President Sergio Mattarella said during the meeting with Tunisian President Kais Saied.

Immigration was the key issue during Saied’s official visit to Italy, said Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, who signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Tunisia’s Foreign Minister Othman Jerandi.

“Tunisia is a strategic partner in the Mediterranean region on immigration issues and Libya,” Di Maio said in a press conference.

Most of the migrants trying to reach Europe from North Africa depart from Tunisia and Libya. Over the past few years, Italy has provided both countries with equipment, resources, and ships in an attempt to thwart migrant crossings. But they continue to arrive on the shores of Lampedusa, located 105 miles southwest of Sicily, and on other tiny islands scattered across the Mediterranean.

“We must ask ourselves why a mother accepts for herself and her son the risk of becoming food for fish and then maybe to be exploited,” Saied said after the meeting with Mattarella.

“The problem is that there is no fair distribution of wealth between the north and the south of the world.”

In an interview with RAI, the Italian state broadcaster’s news, Saied remembered how it was the Italians who used to immigrate to his country. The roles may be reversed now but the motive remains the same.

“Those who migrate are in search of fortune, just as they were in the past,” he said.

Mattarella reaffirmed to his Tunisian counterpart “the great friendship that binds Italy to Tunisia.” He recalled “the great friendship and primary partnership” between the two countries who share “the values of democracy, a geographical proximity, and some common history.”

He also stressed that peacemaking and stabilization in Libya represent a priority of Italian foreign policy.

“In order to achieve this, mercenaries and foreign troops must leave the country. Libya must be left to the Libyans,” Mattarella was quoted to Arab News by a source in the Italian administration.

While in Rome, Saied also met with Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi and Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese. According to sources in the prime minister’s office, more assistance has been offered to Tunisia, but more “attention and effort in contrasting illegal migration will have to be enforced.”



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Boats carrying hundreds of migrants arrive in Italy's Lampedusa  
Tunisian cemetery offers living memorial to 'unknown migrants'

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## [Rights groups urge EU to protect life on sea route from Libya](#)

Wed, 2021-06-16 17:46

LONDON: Leading rights groups have called on the EU to protect lives on the main Mediterranean route between Libya and Europe.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) on Wednesday published an action plan to promote

safe pathways on the precarious route from North Africa.

The 20-point plan gives guidance on how the EU could ensure safe and predictable disembarking opportunities and relocation responses for people rescued.

“It is shameful and tragic that EU countries can’t agree on something as fundamental as saving lives at sea,” said Judith Sunderland, HRW’s associate Europe and Central Asia director. “People are drowning while European leaders squabble.”

An estimated 20,000 people have died or disappeared in the central Mediterranean in the last decade. According to the UN, some 664 people have died or gone missing so far this year.

HRW accused the EU of “withdrawing responsibility,” noting that the bloc has since March 2019 been withdrawing its ships from areas where unseaworthy boats carrying migrants and refugees are most likely to be.

Libya’s Coast Guard has intercepted and returned to the country more than 11,700 people this year, with up to 1,000 migrants returned on June 12 alone.

People recovered and returned to Libya face being detained in “nightmarish detention centers and experiencing abysmal conditions, violence, and forced labor,” HRW said.

It added that the EU should abandon its policy of assisting the return of migrants and refugees to Libya, and urgently adopt one that ensures migrants are relocated to a safe place.

HRW called for new relocation arrangements so EU member states can share the responsibility of migration from Libya more equally.

EU heads of state are expected to discuss migration policy at the next European Council meeting on June 24-25 in Brussels.



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HRW criticizes Italy, EU's Libya migrant policy Italian island in plea for help after 600 migrants arrive in 24 hours