

Lawmakers take every precaution to stay alive until presidential poll

THOUSANDS OF ARMY TROOPS, POLICE COMMITTED TO PROTECTING MPS

Rym Ghazal
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: Thousands of army troops and police officers, including the Internal Security Forces special "Panthers" unit and bomb-sniffing dogs, have been assigned a single task for the next few weeks - protecting Lebanese lawmakers.

Fake license plates, tinted windows, decoys, restricted movement or simply opting to leave Lebanon are just some of the tactics in effect during what the head of the Internal Security Forces (ISF), General Ashraf Rifi, called one of Lebanon's "most dangerous" times.

"We are doing everything possible within our means to provide protection for lawmakers during this extraordinarily dangerous time," Rifi told *The Daily Star* on Wednesday.

Rifi said all MPs have special protection provided by a coordination of efforts between the police and the Lebanese Army. "All the 14 MPs have requested protection, along with a special request from the

MPs of the [opposition] Change and Reform bloc," said Rifi, adding "Amal and Hizbullah MPs have not requested extra security."

One of the Amal MPs, Ali Hassan Khalil, reportedly slept in his parliamentary office the night before Tuesday's election session, which was later postponed to October 23.

However, Rifi said all ministers, whether resigned or not, have additional security.

"We mainly provide bodyguards and have intelligence officers working around the clock," said Rifi, who would not divulge any more information for security reasons.

One of the 22 Reform and Change MPs, Ibrahim Kanaan, described to *The Daily Star* how restrictive the lives of the MPs have become recently.

"I brought the office to my home, and I don't have much of a social life anymore," said Kanaan, who dismissed the idea of making a movie or watching a movie "as impossible now."

"All the MPs are taking extra precautions, and all have

minimized their outings and visits outside their homes," he added. "Not much of a life."

Security sources confirmed that over 40 majority MPs have been housed in two hotels and restricted locations, and have become "one big happy family."

"It was difficult to provide each and every MP special protection and therefore it was decided to protect them in groups," said the security source, who asked to remain anonymous.

Several majority MPs told *The Daily Star* that they would be leaving Lebanon, while

some have already packed their things and left the country until the next parliamentary session in October as a precaution.

The last assassinated MP, Phalange lawmaker Antoine Ghanem, had also followed the pack in taking refuge abroad. He was killed just two days after returning to Lebanon.

Ghanem's fear for his life was best illustrated in how he took it upon himself to drive across the capital in a car with regular plates, his parliamentary blue plate bearing the number 133 hidden in the trunk of the car.

Some officials have their whole families under tight security, such as the Gemayel family, given the assassinations of both Bashir (1982) and Pierre (2006), added the security source.

At the same time, some of the officials remain defiant, with one survivor of an assassination attempt declaring his survival as a "defeat to [Syrian President] Bashar Assad."

"Around critical times, like now, the presidential elections, we can expect anything," said Telecommunication Minister Marwan Hamadeh, adding "like assassinations."

While he would not divulge the security measures he had taken, Hamadeh warned that between now and November 24, when a new president will be elected, was "one of the most dangerous times, and when multiple assassinations may occur."

He also warned against a false sense of security should a president actually be elected.

"With a new president, things might calm down, but I doubt the danger will just end as easily as that."

HIZBULLAH MAN ESCAPES ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

TYRE: A Hizbullah member barely escaped an attempt on his life after he jumped from his car before a hand grenade exploded under the vehicle in South Lebanon on Wednesday, according to a police report.

Almad Mhanna, 53, tried to start his new car, but he was hit by an object falling from the vehicle, which was parked near his home in

FIRST PERSON

Lebanon must set a counter-example in an undemocratic Middle East rife with violence

I had several occasions, since the beginning of my campaign, to underline the need for Parliament to fill the presidential void resulting from the coerced nature of the extension of Emile Lahoud's mandate, over which Speaker Nabih Berri presided in September 2004.

The speaker's absence today, and that of the MPs belonging to his parliamentary group, constitute a further dereliction of their fundamental constitutional duty. Instead of transforming Parliament into the natural place for declared candidates for the presidency to present our program and debate it, tragic undemocratic practices have again denied decent Lebanese men and women their most legitimate political forum, in a country where for the first time since 1972, MPs were freely elected, and where, for the first time since 1970, free presidential elections can be held.

This leaves the people of Lebanon at an impasse where they do not know whom to blame more: the speaker and his allies for these callous practices, reinforced by their violent closure of the streets in the center of Beirut for months on end, or the MPs of the majority who do not dare exercise their basic duties despite the unprecedented serial assassination of our courageous colleagues who dared speak out against tyranny and its brutal practices.

Postponement of the electoral process is grave in itself. A graver dimension has emerged today. For no reason, the speaker has called for the next session to be held on the very last day of the month constitutionally prescribed for

the presidential election. This is unacceptable, and I call on all MPs to meet immediately, every day, and without discontinuity, in order to carry on open deliberations for the presidency, against tyrannical practices, in the great tradition of world democracies since Philadelphia and the Jeu de Paume. This is also consonant within Article 75 of our Constitution, which considers a "Parliament meeting to elect the president of the republic an electoral body and not a legislative assembly."

I call on the UN to open its doors so Lebanese MPs can exercise their duty in New York

Undemocratic practices must be reversed: Instead of petty horse-trading in obscure rooms outside Parliament, with no results due to the entrenched positions on either side, Lebanon can and must offer the violent and undemocratic Middle East an historic counter-example.

Considering the threat to their lives and the lives of presidential candidates, and the unprecedented practice of physical closure of Parliament, if this proves too difficult to carry out in Beirut, I am repeating my call to the UN Organization to shoulder its historic responsibility toward peace and democracy in the Middle East, and to open up if necessary its doors in New York for the free exercise of Lebanese MPs of their constitutional duty.

is a lawyer and a candidate for Lebanon's presidential election.



Keep on the grass: Without subsidies, farmers say they will continue to plant the lucrative crop.

Political impasse means pot of gold for Bekaa cannabis farmers

Tom Perry
Reuters

BEKAA VALLEY: For a poor Lebanese farmer, the cannabis plant sprouting from the fertile ground of the Bekaa Valley is a blessing from God.

For his country, it symbolizes the dwindling authority of a state weakened by conflict.

Surveying a field of the spindly leafed plants, he explained how the government usually sends tractors to destroy the valuable but illegal crop. But this year, they never came, allowing him to reap his first harvest in years.

"Praise God - he wanted to compensate us," he said, declining to give his name. "It's been 12 years - farmers have been going backward, debts have been mounting up."

With Lebanon's government paralyzed by political conflict and its army bogged down with security concerns, farmers have made the most of a security vacuum to grow what locals describe as one of their best cannabis crops since the 1975-1990 Civil War.

In the chaos of war in the 1980s, Lebanon emerged as the Middle East's main source of

narcotics, producing up to 1,000 tons of cannabis resin annually and 30 to 50 tons of opium, from the Bekaa Valley, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

For Bekaa Valley farmers, those were the good old days, said Ali Hamiyeh, mayor of the village of Tarayeh.

"The financial situation was very good. People could do everything, there were no economic restrictions," he said.

"Now things are different."

The end of the Civil War and reconstruction of the state spelled the end for large-scale farming of narcotics, which during the conflict had found their way by land and sea to the streets of Europe.

The smaller quantities produced since the war are mainly consumed locally by farmers said.

Lebanese and Syrian security forces eradicated the crops between 1991 and 1993, UNODC says. Unable to make a decent living from wheat or barley, farmers would plant limited areas with cannabis in the hope it would go unnoticed.

"They would farm a bit here, a bit there. This year they farmed a lot," Hamiyeh said.

The farmers were emboldened by a sense the government was losing its grip, weakened by conflict from the Syrian factions and others allied to Damascus. The army, meanwhile, was busy fighting Islamist militants in Lebanon in a bloody battle that dragged on from May to September.

The control Damascus used to exercise over security in the country ended in 2005 when its troops were forced to withdraw.

"Respect for the state has fallen across Lebanon. With the political conditions and divisions, anything goes," Hamiyeh said.

The cannabis crop is sold directly to local producers of hashish, the resin made from the plant which is usually smoked.

"They come, cut the crop and pay," explained the farmer.

A cannabis field of 1,000 square meters is worth \$1,000 to its owner, against \$50 for the same area of wheat, he said.

The farmer this year only planted a few acres of the cannabis he used to grow during the Civil War, but said he might sow more next season: "We'll monitor the situation and see."

"The great thing about cannabis is that it doesn't need anything. Five kilos of seed cost 10,000 Lebanese pounds (\$7)," the farmer said.

The plant hardly requires water and can grow without fertilizers or pesticides which add to the cost of other crops.

Farmers have no choice other than to grow cannabis "so that we don't fall into debt and are forced to sell our land," he said.

The state has turned its back on farmers.

The Ministry of Agriculture admits it has limited resources available to subsidize cultivation of other crops.

"The budget of the Agriculture Ministry is very, very limited, meaning the ministry cannot offer anything to these people," said Samir al-Chami, director of planned resources at the ministry. Projects launched in the early 1990s and aimed at finding alternatives to cannabis farming have failed, he said.

Security forces were destroying cannabis crops this season, as in previous years, he said. But farmers do continue to farm the plant as long as it is profitable and there are few alternatives.

"People will keep the view that whenever I get the chance and I can escape the state, I will grow this crop," Chami said.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

The British Embassy in Beirut would like to inform you that due to the increased demand in Lebanon for British visas, settlement applications are taking up to 12 weeks to process. Non-settlement applications (e.g. tourist, student and visitors including family visits) are taking up to three weeks to process. However, straightforward non-settlement applications (e.g. if you are a regular traveller to the UK) are usually processed within 24 hours. You will be advised when you submit your application when to return for your decision. For details about our visa services please visit the embassy website: <http://www.britishembassy.gov.uk/lebanon/> British Embassy-Beirut

OBITUARIES

Sons Nicholas, Nareg; daughter Natasha; brothers Berg Jibilian and his wife abroad, and abroad; Jibilian and his family abroad; sisters Laurie wife of late Housig Donabedian and their children; and Yertchan wife of Haggop Tcheklezian and their family; son of her paternal uncle Sarkis Jibilian; daughter of her paternal uncle Caro Tahmajian; and families Krikorian, Jibilian, Donabedian, Tcheklezian, Eshkibashian,

Tanian, Basmajian, Tahmajian, Broudan, and relatives in Lebanon and abroad announced with the deepest regrets the passing away of:

LIDA JIBILIAN
Wife of Sarkis Krikorian

Prayers for her soul will be held on Thursday September 27, 2007 in Toronto, Canada.
Email: Natasha@krikorian.com