

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) – The head of Turkey's Red Crescent organization has stepped down, the state-run news agency reported, months after the aid agency came under intense criticism for selling tents to a charity instead of dispatching them directly to areas devastated by a powerful earthquake in February.

Thought for Today
That the present times are the times of our Holy Prophet and his faithful followers. The best friend of our Holy Prophet is he who, though not related to him, obeys the orders of Allah and his greatest enemy is the man who though related to him, disobeys Allah.
Amir al-Momeneen Ali (AS)

Hezbollah: Netanyahu Launched Gaza Aggression to Divert Attention From Zionist Crisis

BEIRUT (Dispatches) – Benjamin Netanyahu launched the Zionist regime's latest deadly campaign of bombardment and assassinations in the Gaza Strip in an attempt to divert attention away from the crisis in the occupied territories, the Lebanese Hezbollah movement's secretary general Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah says.



Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah addresses his supporters onscreen during a rally commemorating the group's late leaders in Jebshit village, southern Lebanon February 16, 2023.

But the Zionist prime minister's tactics have failed to get the desired results, the Hezbollah secretary-general added.

The chief of Lebanon's resistance movement made the remarks in a ceremony held in the southern Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh to commemorate the 7th anniversary of the martyrdom of Sayyed Mustafa Badr al-Deen, a military leader of Hezbollah and an advisor to the resistance movement's chief.

Nasrallah hailed Badr al-Deen as an "insightful commander" with deep knowledge and strategic mentality, saying he attained all "honorable medals" a resistance fighter could achieve.

The Hezbollah chief said Badr al-Deen's repeated calls for working under a unified banner manifested the unity of the Axis of Resistance.

Nasrallah offered his condolences to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad resistance movement over the martyrdom of its commanders in recent Zionist airstrikes.

"We all know Netanyahu is the one who initiated the aggression by assassinating three Islamic Jihad commanders from the Al-Quds Brigades in the Strip and a number of women and children," Nasrallah said. "Netanyahu's motives behind the aggression were clear as he

was trying to restore deterrence, flee the internal crisis, deal with divisions in his coalition cabinet and improve his political and electoral status."

"Netanyahu's calculations were a failure as he decided to target the Islamic Jihad movement and spare the rest of the factions, and create chaos within the resistance front," he added.

Islamic Jihad acted wisely after the assassination of the leaders in the Al-Quds Brigades, Nasrallah said, adding that the Israeli enemy was waiting for a reaction from the movement and when its leadership resorted to calm, the enemy became confused.

Resistance in Gaza is powerful thanks to the unity between the Palestinian factions, Nasrallah said. "The unity of

the Palestinian resistance factions has prevented the occupation from achieving its goals."

The secretary-general of Hezbollah also said it is unfortunate the international community remained silent and the United States prevented the UN Security Council from condemning Israel for killing women and children in Gaza.

"The battle of Gaza is important and its effects are not limited to the Strip, but to the entire region, and we are in constant contact with the leadership of the resistance in Gaza, and we will not hesitate to provide assistance at any time when duty calls," Nasrallah said.

The occupying regime has been continuously bombarding the besieged Gaza Strip over the past four days,

assassinating several resistance commanders and killing civilians, including women and children. In response, Palestinian resistance factions have launched retaliatory strikes toward Israeli cities and settlements, with the Israeli military saying nearly 1,000 rockets have so far been fired from the Strip.

Meanwhile, Nasrallah touched on Syria's readmission to the Arab League after over a decade and commended as an "important step" Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's invitation to the Arab summit next week. "Syria remained in place and did not change its position or axis," the Hezbollah chief said. "All the positive developments in Syria took place with the blessings of the steadfastness of its leadership, army and people."

Underlining that the restoration of relations with Syria serves Lebanon's national interest, Nasrallah said, "Lebanon is called to restore ties with Syria, what are we waiting for?"

Elsewhere in his remarks, Nasrallah pointed to the presidential elections in Lebanon and said Hezbollah had chosen Christian politician and former Minister Suleiman Franjeh as the movement's nominee.

"We chose our candidate, and he is a natural and serious candidate, and our support for this nomination is not outside the Lebanese structure, and we do not impose our candidate on anyone, and let each party nominate any name."

"The caretaker government must continue to carry out its work within the limits of the constitution despite all the difficulties, and we are thankful for doing so."

Turkey Set to Vote in Historic Elections



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has excelled at splitting his rivals and forging unlikely unions while winning one national election after another over 21 years.

ANKARA (AFP) – Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan led Saturday prayers at Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia mosque, ahead of a battle for his political life against his rival on Sunday.

The 69-year-old emulated a ritual that Ottoman Sultans performed before they led their men off to war as he braces for Sunday's parliamentary and presidential ballot.

Erdogan has never faced a more energized or united opposition than the one led by retired civil servant Kemal Kilicdaroglu and his disparate alliance of six parties.

The Turkish leader excelled at splitting his rivals and forging unlikely unions while winning one national election after another over 21 years.

The six opposition parties have put aside their political and cultural differences and joined forces for the lone task of pushing Erdogan out.

They are officially supported by Turkey's main pro-Kurdish party — a group that accounts for at least 10 percent of the vote.

The math is not adding up in Erdogan's favor and most polls show him trailing his secular rival by a few points.

Kilicdaroglu is now desperately trying to break the 50-percent threshold and avoid a May 28 runoff that could give Erdogan a chance to regroup and reframe the debate.

"Are you ready to bring democracy

to this country? To bring peace to this country? I promise, I am ready too," Kilicdaroglu told a rally in Ankara.

Erdogan was put in the uncomfortable position of being asked what he would do if he lost.

The veteran leader bristled and pledged to respect the vote. "This is a very silly question," he said.

"We came to power in Turkey by democratic means, with the approval of our people. If our people were to change their mind, we would do what democracy requires."

The Hagia Sophia was built as a Byzantine cathedral — once the world's largest — before being converted into a mosque by the Ottomans.

It was converted into a museum when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk created a secular post-Ottoman Turkey in 1923.

Erdogan's decision to convert it back into a mosque in 2020 solidified his hero status among his religious supporters and contributed to growing Western unease with his rule.

"The entire West got mad — but I did it," Erdogan told an Istanbul rally on Saturday.

Erdogan has played up religious themes and used culture wars to try and energize his conservative and nationalist base.

He brands the opposition as a "pro-LGBT" lobby that takes orders from outlawed Kurdish militants and is bankrolled by the West.

U.S. Lawmakers Introduce Bill to Combat Normalization With Syria

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – A bipartisan group of American lawmakers have introduced a bill that will prohibit the United States from normalizing diplomatic relations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government and levy further sanctions on the regional countries resuming their ties with Damascus, amid Washington's indignation about Syria's readmission to the Arab League.

The bill, introduced by Reps. Joe Wilson and Steve Cohen as well as several other members of the House, would bar "any federal government department or agency from recognizing or normalizing with any government in Syria led by Bashar al-Assad," and expand on the Caesar Act, which imposed a tough round of

sanctions on Damascus in 2020.

The legislation would require "an annual strategy for five years to counter normalization" with the Assad government by the countries which have taken steps to normalize relations with Damascus.

The bipartisan bill would also pave the way for sanctions to be imposed on the countries which engage in energy transactions with Syria and allow Syrian airlines to land in their airports.

"The United States must use all of our leverage to stop normalization with Assad," Michael McCaul, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement on the bill. "I am proud to join my colleagues in mandating further sanctions against any form of invest-

ment in territory under the control of Assad."

The legislation came days after Syria was readmitted to the Arab League, an incident that enraged US officials who intended to keep Syria isolated.

Media reports cited a senior U.S. congressional staffer working on the bill as saying the bipartisan legislation was a warning to Turkey and Arab countries that they could face severe consequences if they engaged with the Assad government.

"The readmission of Syria to the Arab League really infuriated (Congress) members and made clear the need to quickly act to send a signal," the staffer underlined.

Arab government representatives in Cairo voted on Sunday to return

Syria to the Arab League after a 12-year suspension, with all 13 of the 22 member states attending the session endorsing the decision.

The Arab League had suspended the membership of Syria, one of the founding members, in November 2011, at the start of foreign-backed militancy in the country. Syria denounced the move as "illegal and a violation of the organization's charter."

Riyadh and Damascus agreed in March to resume diplomatic relations and re-open embassies after more than a decade.

On Wednesday, Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz invited Assad to attend an Arab League summit scheduled to be held in the Persian Gulf kingdom next week.

Lebanese Man's Death in UAE Custody Raises Questions About Possible Mistreatment

BEIRUT (AP) – A Lebanese man who was detained in the United Arab Emirates on unknown charges has died in custody, rights observers and family members say, raising questions about his possible mistreatment by authorities.

A committee of family members of Lebanese citizens detained in the UAE, including the man who died earlier this month, alleged in a statement that Ghazi Ezzedine, 55, had died under torture.

The UAE foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Sima Watling, a researcher with Amnesty International focused on the Persian Gulf country, said that according to Ezzedine's family, he had been arrested on March 22 along with eight other people, including two of his brothers, on unknown charges.

Ezzedine died on May 4, she said. His family was only notified several days later, when his son was asked by authorities to come to the cemetery and identify the body, she added. Ezzedine's son was only

permitted to see his father's face, while his body was kept covered.

UAE authorities denied the family's request to bring him back to Lebanon for burial, Watling said. The two brothers who were detained along with him were subsequently released from detention but banned from leaving the country.

A Lebanese official who is following the case told The Associated Press that Ezzedine's cause of death was unknown. He said eight members of the same family were detained for unknown reasons. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because diplomatic contacts between Lebanon and the UAE are ongoing regarding the death and the repatriation of the body.

Afif Shouman, head of a group of Lebanese families with relatives detained in the country, said Ezzedine had lived in the UAE for 30 years "without so much as a traffic ticket."

There were "no suspicions about the man that he

got involved in political matters or even religious ones," he said.

UAE authorities have detained dozens of Lebanese in the past.

In 2019, the UAE sentenced one Lebanese national to life in prison and two to ten years in prison.

Amnesty International said in a statement at the time the trial of the men "failed to meet international fair trial standards," as the evidence included confessions that were "extracted under duress, and the defendants were detained incommunicado for months and denied access to lawyers during interrogation and investigation."

Watling said Amnesty is concerned about the lack of transparency regarding Ezzedine's case and the linked detentions.

"If it is found that his death was indeed unlawful, they must ensure that all those suspected of torture and unlawful killing, including those with command responsibility, are held accountable," she said.

Top U.S. Senate Committee Calls for Release of Jailed Detainee in Egypt

CAIRO (Middle East Eye) – The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee is calling on Egyptian authorities to immediately release Salah Soltan, the arbitrarily detained father of a prominent U.S. human rights defender.

"Deeply concerned by Salah Soltan's rapidly declining health due to neglect in prison. Egyptian authorities should release him & allow immediate access to life-saving medical care," the committee, chaired by Senator Bob Menendez, wrote on Twitter.

Congressman Don Beyer also took to Twitter and called for his release.

"Dr Salah Soltan should never have been imprisoned to begin with, but the conditions he faces - including denial of essential health care - are now threatening his life. I call on Egyptian authorities to immediately release Dr Soltan."

Salah is a legal permanent resident of the U.S. and was forcibly disappeared in June 2020, just days after his son Mohamed Soltan filed a lawsuit against the Egyptian state for torture and other crimes committed against him

years earlier.

He is currently serving a life sentence at Badr 1 prison, east of Cairo, following a mass trial that was marred by extensive due process and fair trial violations.

Earlier this month, 51 human rights organisations called on Egyptian authorities to release Soltan, citing a letter leaked on 20 March 2023 in which Salah said authorities at Badr 1 prison had deprived him of adequate health care even though he suffers from life-threatening heart and liver diseases.

During a recent prison visit, the family said Salah was carried into a room by two guards, as he was not able to carry his own weight.

According to several unnamed sources cited by the groups, including former detainees, in a separate incident Salah collapsed in his cell and was immobile during the first half of January 2023.

The U.S. provides Egypt with \$1.3bn in military aid annually, the second-highest amount after the Zionist regime. President Biden has faced pressure within some quarters of Congress to push back on Egypt's human rights record.