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# The Daily Star

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LL2,000 (Syria SL25)

Millennium  
countdown

80

days to go

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## Decentralization draft to set off sparks in House

Zeina Abu Rizk  
Daily Star staff

Parliament's joint committees meet Tuesday to study the administrative decentralization draft, a highly controversial bill that has already been criticized by lawmakers for violating the Taif Accord and giving too much power to the Interior Ministry.

The examination of the draft begins on the eve of a two-day legislative session, which will see MPs tackling equally sensitive government proposals such as the law to curb illicit enrichment. Decentralization is not on this week's agenda, but a flurry of meetings on Monday underlined the extent of controversy it is likely to spark.

Speaker Nabih Berri and former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri discussed the issue for an hour at Parliament. Berri later received Metn MP Nassib Lahoud.

A source close to both meetings said that Hariri and Lahoud expressed their dissatisfaction and fears regarding the draft. Hariri said that the bill contradicted the Taif Accord, since it ultimately abolishes the governorates which the agreement had called for.

Lahoud repeated his criticism

Hariri. According to a parliamentary source, the former premier considered that the illicit wealth draft was aimed at "setting a trap for Parliament."

Berri and Hariri agreed that the draft on illicit wealth was tantamount to introducing constitutional amendments without resorting to the traditional procedures for their passing.

Berri said that the bill contradicts the constitution, which stipulates that ministers and the prime minister should be prosecuted before the Higher Committee for the Trial of Presidents and Ministers in the event of a misuse of power. The draft, however, stipulates that, if accused of penal crimes, their prosecution would be in the regular tribunals, while for "political" crimes only their hearing would be in the Higher Committee for the Trial of Presidents and Ministers.

"This leaves only the president answerable to the Higher Committee," said Berri.

Raymond Edde, the Paris-based head of the National Bloc, sent a letter to the speaker on Tuesday, in which he called for "a number of necessary amendments to the draft, especially since I was the one who had suggested the law on corruption endorsed in Feb-



Berri keeps them guessing

## Lahoud vows to punish soldiers who attack demonstrators, journalists

# Eco-protest ends in army violence

Maha Al-Azar  
Daily Star staff

At least two journalists and several Greenpeace activists were beaten Monday by security forces and factory workers during a protest at the site of a chemical fertilizer company in the port town of Selaata, north Lebanon.

The violence against the protesters prompted a stern denunciation from President Emile Lahoud who vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice.

What started as a non-violent protest over the alleged environmental pollution emanating from the chemical plant escalated into a pitched battle with security forces swinging their rifle butts at unarmed demonstrators.

Some 25 Greenpeace activists gathered inside the grounds of the Lebanese Chemical Company, having found the gates open and unguarded. The protesters tried to raise banners which read "Deep Trouble" and "Save our Seas" but were prevented when soldiers fired shots over their heads and then began beating demonstrators. Journalists and women were not spared and cameras were confiscated.



Freedom of expression: Lebanese Army soldier swings his rifle at Greenpeace demonstrator

Todd Southgate, a Canadian samples taken off the coast of Beirut, and...

## Amman calls off Israeli's visit to protest attack

Randa Habib  
Agence France Presse

AMMAN: Jordan has postponed a visit by Israeli Commerce Minister Ran Cohen to protest an attack by Jewish settlers on Jordanian legislators at the weekend, a high-ranking Jordanian official said Monday.

The official Petra News Agency said the postponement was necessary because Jordanian Trade Minister Mohammed Asfur had "prior engagements" and would be unable to see Cohen as planned, but the official said Amman wanted to send a message to the Jewish state.

"We've decided to postpone indefinitely Cohen's visit ... because of the hostile attitude of the Jewish settlers toward the Jordanian parliamentary delegation during its visit to Hebron," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Jordan is not willing to receive any Israeli official until the Hebron incident is clarified and Israeli authorities respond to a request for a full investigation."

Jordan launched a formal protest on Sunday over an attack by Jewish settlers on Jordanian MPs visiting Hebron and warned that the incident had a "negative" effect on the peace process.

Israeli Embassy spokesman Roey Gilad confirmed that Cohen would not be arriving in Amman on Wednesday for talks which were intended to bolster



Pro-Gaith sheikhs come together in a demonstration against "Druze feudalism"

## Gaith strikes back with protest to retain control over endowments

Ranwa Yehia  
Daily Star staff

Supporters of acting spiritual leader Sheikh Bahjat Ghaith staged a protest at the sect's seat on Monday to back their demands that the government stop a draft law that would unite Druze religious endowments.

The draft law, which is expected to be discussed in Parliament later this week, has been endorsed by the two major Druze political leaders, Chouf MP Walid Jumblatt and his Aley counterpart Talal Arslan, during a Syrian-sponsored meeting three weeks ago.

Jumblatt and Arslan put aside their differences to formulate a law that would transfer the authority of religious endowments to themselves and other Druze MPs instead of the spiritual leader, or *sheikh al-aql*.

The law would also reform the administration that runs the endowments, including property belonging to the Druze religious authority, revenue from which finances a variety of philanthropic activities.

A member of the Druze

endowments administration, Ezzeddine Makarem, said that the draft aimed at destroying the existing religious authority and eventually eliminating the position of the spiritual leader.

Makarem added that "Druze feudalism" was trying to strip Ghaith of his authority.

Sheikh Shafiq Abdel-Baqi read out the content of a telegram the sheikhs sent to President Emile Lahoud, Speaker Nabih Berri and Prime Minister Salim Hoss.

"We urge you to stop the endorsement of the draft law because it aims to cause conflict among the Druze and wipe out Druze religious authority," Abdel-Baqi said.

He added that the draft law would divide the religious endowments among "those who suggested and formulated it so that can replace the religious council with a fake endowments committee."

Abdel-Baqi added that the legislation should not be endorsed without consulting the spiritual leader.

The draft requires the approval of all Druze MPs before it

can be endorsed - something that sources predict is unlikely since Information Minister and Marjayoun-Hasbaya MP Anwar Khalil opposes the law.

A source at the protest said those chosen as members of the proposed "Directorate of Druze Endowments" during the meeting between Jumblatt and Arslan were clearly political representatives of the two leaders.

He added that Arslan consented to meet Jumblatt and took a stand against Ghaith, whom he once supported, for reasons related to the 2000 parliamentary elections.

"Arslan's position is weak in both the Chouf and Aley and he could only make it (in the elections) if he got Jumblatt's support," the source said.

Jumblatt and Arslan first met on Sept. 12 to discuss a decision made earlier by Ghaith to form a committee that would run the endowments.

They then met on Sept. 29 at the office of Major General Ghazi Kanaan, the head of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon, to nominate members of the directorate.

# Talks boost bilateral ties with Damascus

Ramzi Mansour  
Daily Star correspondent

DAMASCUS: Finalizing a wide-ranging series of cooperative agreements in education, transport and industry were the focus of high level talks on Monday between Prime Minister Salim Hoss and his Syrian counterpart, Mahmoud Zoubi.

Co-chairing a meeting of the Lebanese-Syrian Joint Coordination Committee, the two premiers discussed 19 draft agreements that would boost cooperation between the two countries' power, oil, agriculture, communications, healthcare and military industries.

The discussions on electricity

focused on a plan that is being studied by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey to create a joint power-sharing grid.

Discussions on education cooperation addressed higher education, vocational education and public education. The deals call for an exchange of education professionals and joint-research projects to help improve the two countries' school systems.

Other potential deals would encourage cooperation between non-governmental organizations, airline companies, port authorities and professional orders - doctors, lawyers and engineers - in the two countries.

The committee discussed the prospects of linking the power

and telephone networks of the two countries, supplying Lebanon with Syrian natural gas, encouraging the exchange of agricultural and industrial goods, and executing joint irrigation projects.

Other possible agreements would facilitate border crossings and encourage Lebanese medical companies to import Syrian-made medicines. Further discussions examined the potential for coordinating joint tourism campaigns. Another deal would renovate parts of Lebanon's railroad network and connect it to Syrian stations.

The joint committee also discussed recommendations by various subcommittees to speed

up the implementation of joint agreements that have already been endorsed.

The talks, which end Tuesday, were attended by Lebanese and Syrian ministers. Monday's meetings were preceded by a conclave between Hoss and Zoubi and followed by a meeting between Hoss and Colonel Bashar Assad, son of Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Zoubi opened the bilateral talks with a speech that stressed the importance of the special ties that exist between Lebanon and Syria and hailed the two countries' coordination in their peace talks with Israel.

"Syria and Lebanon's joint stance against Israeli challenges and their adherence to UN resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict make the two countries stronger," Zoubi said. "Needless to say, Syria will back Lebanon - just as it has always done."

Hoss echoed Zoubi's views and hailed the joint committee's achievements and its supervision of bilateral agreements under the 1991 Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination Agreement between the two countries.

Nasri Khoury, secretary-general of the Higher Lebanese-Syrian Council, which brings together the two countries' presidents, speakers and premiers, said that the two-hour talks "reviewed the draft agreements that were prepared by the joint committee. Final decisions will be made Tuesday."

Bilateral meetings between Lebanese ministers and their Syrian counterparts began Monday and will continue until Tuesday's final council meeting.

## Jezzine MP: be lenient with SLA men

Spurred by the likelihood of an imminent Israeli withdrawal, Jezzine MP Nadim Salem urged Parliament on Monday to support his draft bill granting amnesty to all members of the SLA and their collaborators.

Salem, who has campaigned for the fair treatment of ex-militiamen since the liberation of the Jezzine enclave in June, said that endorsing an amnesty would encourage SLA members to defect, thus hastening an end to the occupation.

"The possibility of recovering these Lebanese who dealt with the enemy and joined (SLA commander Antoine) Lahd becomes difficult if they don't receive protection from the government," he told a news conference at Parliament.

Salem said his bill was similar to the 1991 general amnesty granted to all militiamen who fought in the civil war, which he said "marked the beginning of national harmony."

Parliament will hold a two-day general session beginning Wednesday to study several law proposals, including Salem's.

The MP said that the adoption of his law would also prevent prisons from being clogged with former militiamen awaiting trial.

Salem said his bill differed from a similar proposal by Nabatieh MP Mohammed Raad, the head of Hizbullah's politburo. While Raad's bill did not include senior militiamen, Salem's includes all serving SLA members. The Hizbullah MP's draft also set a three-month grace period for militiamen to turn themselves in to qualify for the amnesty, whereas Salem's did not include any time limit.



Zoubi and Hoss confer after a meeting in Damascus to discuss improving bilateral cooperation

Death penalty recommended in murder case

Youssef Diah

Withdrawal of occupation troops from

Lahoud supports anti-A...

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## Split personality

It has been said that Lebanon has a national identity crisis, that many of its citizens are torn by conflicting ideas about what this country should look like and about what their role in it should be. Sadly however, it is not the Lebanese who most profoundly lack a clear self-image: it is their government.

The latest example of this split personality came with the closure of Net2Phone, a service allowing overseas calls via the internet. The Hoss Cabinet likes to extol its own virtues as a champion of free markets, but this was a move that no liberal democracy can make and still lay claim to the title.

The premier and his colleagues have made much of their plans to trim the deficit through privatization, but one gets the feeling that they themselves are not convinced of the widely accepted wisdom of such a move: instead, they seem intent on more government control over the economy, not less.

The Central Bank still owns Middle East Airlines, a perennial money-loser, but refuses to let chairman Mohammed Hout carry out changes that might make it either a profitable venture or a candidate for sale to the private sector. MEA's prices are high, its service is shabby, and most of the people who actually work for it – as opposed to the multitudes who remain employees in name only but continue to collect paychecks – are grossly underpaid. Hout is definitely mov-

ing in the right direction but remains on such a short leash that the job cannot possibly be done properly. Many people might never take notice because they have re-programmed their remote controls to bypass Tele-Liban, but the state-run TV station costs Lebanese taxpayers millions of dollars a year, and yet we see no sign of trying to wean it off the government teat.

The state is making money from the Casino du Liban, but selling it off to some pros and levying a special charge on its subsequent profits would almost certainly produce far better revenues.

In addition, the government is still in the business of generating and distributing electricity. It has thrown some very large hints that Electricite du Liban will be privatized, but very little apparent progress has been made on this front.

The easiest decisions have to do with water. Public ownership of this utility is clearly incapable of setting things right, especially in light of the country's increasing population and dwindling resources: the private sector could certainly do no worse and could be obligated contractually to make investments that the state cannot afford.

Talk is cheap, and this government is setting records for oral extravaganzas that never fail to be followed by the sound of opportunities withering on the vine.

the Day of  
6 Billion

1999  
HARVEY

## Independence

by **Ali Jarbawi**

**T**he National Independence Day celebrations for the state of Palestine in 2020 were very special for both general and personal reasons: Palestine was celebrating its 20th Independence Day, and the country had begun to take on a festive air early that year in preparation for the extended celebrations. On the personal side, this occasion granted me a lifetime gift I had always wished for in a priceless, beautiful gift that I was given after much hardship and waiting.

About a month before that holiday, my grandson, aged 10, had just turned 10. I had been waiting for him to turn 10 for a long time.

Letters to the editor

# Friends on the other side

The Daily  
Star

Date: April 19,  
2000

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Facts are merciless things that make no distinction between right and wrong and harbor no sympathy for the downtrodden. They dictate that Lebanon has neither the military brawn to make Israel a more pleasant neighbor nor the diplomatic influence to break its spell over other governments. They do not, however, absolve the Lebanese of the responsibility to resist occupation in other ways.

Guerrilla warfare can only do so much in convincing an enemy army to decamp and almost nothing to keep it from returning. This is where the brainier side of political conflict comes in, and also where we have much to gain if only we can face a few facts ourselves. Accepting these facts contradicts what has become popular culture here, but that is what makes "knowing" something to be true a lot more reliable than "believing" it to be so.

Israel is not a Satanic land populated by bloodthirsty savages who happen to own a few F-15s. It is a relatively modern state with a political spectrum far wider than almost any Arab country's. Its citizens enjoy more legal protection for their freedoms than do any of their Arab counterparts: they have much to be proud of.

Unfortunately, they also have a lot to be ashamed of, and many Israelis are. Groups like Bet' Selem, Peace Now, and Four Mothers struggle to have their government respect human rights, obey international laws against colonizing conquered land and end the occupation of south Lebanon. Israel's Supreme Court has ruled the holding of Lebanese prisoners as "bargaining chips" to be illegal. One of its justices has warned of a massacre at the Khiam detention center if detainees there are not properly protected. The current government includes Yossi Sarid, who has lobbied for the inclusion of Palestinian poetry in schoolbooks so that young Israelis can learn to understand that human suffering did not begin and end with Hitler's evil plans.

These are people who can be talked to, who can be reasoned with. There are many ways in which they differ from us but even more in which they are the same. We may not be able to agree with them on everything but we nonetheless share a common cause: promoting the genuine well-being of our children and grandchildren above the counterfeit security proffered by the warmongers.

These people should be our allies. Instead, we rarely acknowledge the yawning chasm that separates them from the paranoid racists who hold sway over so much of Israel's gov-

ernment, military, and diplomatic corps. We tend to tar all Israelis - and, often, all Jews - with the same brush and that is a mistake.

First of all, it is wrong to judge people on the basis of their religion rather than on the substance of their actions. We rightly accuse many Israelis of doing just that but that does not give us carte blanche to return the favor at no cost to our consciences.

Second, by viewing Israel as a monolith of mindless automatons who live to loathe Arabs, we waste an opportunity to strike at the underbelly of the Jewish state's hard-line establishment: public opinion. When Four Mothers demands that the Israeli Army withdraws from Lebanon, we gain nothing by claiming to have "crushed the Zionist entity." That only makes us look foolish in the eyes of the world and supplies ammunition to the extremists who would have Israeli voters perceive us as incurable belligerents.

It is fine for Hizbullah to take pride in its exploits on the battlefield but it should never stoop to David Levy's level by matching the Israeli foreign minister's malignant rhetoric with vitriol of its own. In the big picture, he is simply a hateful little man who should be studiously ignored.

Our leaders should be proactive instead of reserving comment for responses to incendiary statements from Israeli officials. President Lahoud and Premier Hoss could help their own people immeasurably by reaching out to those of the Jewish state, by going over the heads of their political leaders to convince them that, just as the Lebanese are ready to fight those who make war, so are we ready to befriend those who want peace.

Damascus has also neglected its own interests by failing to address those Israelis who view a "peace of the brave" as more than a pithy slogan. Lebanon and Syria have actually abetted efforts by successive Israeli governments to isolate us. That is especially tragic because the extremists who belong on the outside looking in have instead been given the keys to the palace. In part, the Jewish state is dominated by a culture of enmity because we have waited too long to help those Israelis who long for change.

There are some Israelis who will always despise us. The rest can and should be our friends when the time is right, and again our cousins when memories have faded. There is a reason why the words *salam* and *shalom* are so obviously linked. The sooner we acknowledge that, the sooner more of them will.