

## Makhlouf miffed

## Video tiff points to growing Assad family rift

BEIRUT, May 18, (AP): Syria's telecommunications authority on Sunday said a deadline for a cellular company owned by the cousin of President Bashar Assad to pay back its debts to the state has ended, adding that legal measures will be taken against the company to recover the money.

The announcement came hours after Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, released a new video in which the businessman said he was asked to step down from the leadership of Syriatel, the biggest telecommunication company in the country. Syriatel has 11 million subscribers, with 50% of revenues going to the state.

The new video by Makhlouf, the third in less than a month, was another hint of a rumored major rift in the tight-knit Assad family, which has ruled Syria for nearly 50 years.

Makhlouf was once described as central to Syria's economy and a partner to the president. His videos, posted on a new Facebook page, seem to be a running public diary of a widening rift - and the fall from grace of a once-powerful tycoon.

In the latest video, Makhlouf, who is under

## Four of 7 DAESH escapees recaptured

## Airstrikes in east Syria kill Iran-backed fighters

BEIRUT, May 18, (AP): Unknown warplanes attacked Iran-backed fighters in eastern Syria near the Iraqi border, killing several of the Iraqi militiamen, Syrian opposition activists said Sunday.

The strikes late Saturday targeted a base near the border town of Boukamal, killing seven fighters, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor.

Omar Abu Laila, a Europe-based activist from Syria's eastern Deir el-Zour province,

confirmed a strike hit Iran-backed Iraqi fighters in the area but had no exact word on casualties. The strikes came days after reinforcements were brought into the area from Iraq, the Observatory and Abu Laila said.

Abu Laila, who runs Deir Ezzor 24, an activist collective that reports on news in the border area, said Israel was most likely behind the attack, but gave no evidence.

Israel rarely comments on such reports, although

it has acknowledged carrying out airstrikes inside Syria on numerous occasions over the course of Syria's nine-year conflict, saying it was going after Iranian military targets in the country.

There have recently been several reports of suspected Israeli strikes inside Syria, including one on May 4 that left 14 Iranian-backed fighters dead, according to the Observatory.

Meanwhile seven members of the Islamic State group escaped from a small prison in north-

east Syria on Sunday, with four recaptured and a search continuing for the remaining three, said Syrian state media and an official with the main Kurdish-led U.S.-backed force in the region.

The militants fled from a jail on the edge of the town of Al-Hol, home to a sprawling camp where tens of thousands of IS wives, widows and children live, said state news agency SANA and a spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Forces, Mervan Qamishlo. The prison is separate from the camp.

American and European sanctions, vowed not to give up the company and apologized to his arrested employees, whom he was unable to get released after they were detained in recent

weeks. Makhlouf did not say who had called on him to step down.

The Syrian Telecommunications Regulatory Authority said in a statement carried by state

news agency SANA that Syriatel had refused to pay fees to the state, therefore "Syriatel will be responsible for all the legal repercussions" for refusing to give back the dues.

In his first video in late April, Makhlouf pleaded with Assad to help prevent the company's collapse through excessive and "unjust" taxation.

## News in Brief

**CAIRO:** The novel coronavirus (Covid-19) has killed 18 more people in Egypt, bringing the country's death toll to 630, said the Ministry of Health on Sunday.

The deadly virus has also infected 510 more people, raising the total number of infections in this North African country to 12,229, the ministry's spokesman Khaled Mujahed in a press statement.

Out of the total figure, 3,172 patients have been cured of the respiratory disease and discharged from hospital, the spokesman added. (KUNA)

**BEIRUT:** Lebanese Ministry of Health declared on Sunday recording nine new coronavirus infection cases in past 24 hours increasing the toll to 911.

The ministry said in its daily report about the contagious disease that no deaths were reported in the past 24 hours, thus the tally of fatalities remained at 26.

A four-day full lockdown is scheduled to expire on Monday. (KUNA)

**AMMAN:** Jordanian authorities reported on Sunday six new cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19), bringing the tally to 613 cases.

In a press release, Jordanian Health Minister Saad Jaber indicated that four cases of the infection have recovered, while 131 individuals are receiving treatment.

Despite the expansion of economic and productive activities, Jordan continues to implement a comprehensive curfew on holidays and a party one during the weekdays. (KUNA)

**AMMAN:** Syria declared on Sunday recording seven new coronavirus infection cases raising the tally to 58.

Official Syrian news agency, SANA, quoted a statement released by the ministry of health as saying all the newly registered contamination cases were of persons who have recently come back to the country.

Syria witnessed first such infection on March 22, prompting authorities later to impose partial lockdown and shut borders with neighboring Lebanon. (KUNA)

**KUWAIT CITY:** Turkey on Sunday confirmed 44 more deaths from the novel coronavirus in the country over the past 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 4,140.

Total number of registered coronavirus cases increased to 149,435 as 1,368 more people tested positive for the virus, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said, as quoted by the official Anadolu News Agency.

So far, 109,962 patients have recovered with 1,825 newly recorded cases, Koca said.

Koca added that 914 patients remained in intensive care units, with 468 among them surviving on life support apparatuses.

He also revealed that 35,369 tests were conducted in the past hours, with the overall number of tests exceeding 1.6 million. (KUNA)

**RABAT:** Morocco reported, Sunday, 129 new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases with the total increasing to 6,870.

In a statement, the health ministry director of the department of epidemiology, Mohamad Al-Yobi, said that the total number of death cases in the country settled at 192.

The recoveries are at 3,660 with 173 individuals overcoming the virus. (KUNA)

**TUNIS:** The Tunisian Ministry of Health on Sunday reported zero cases of infection with the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) which dropped up in the country two days ago after five days of lull.

The overall number of infections remained unchanged at 1,037 in the past 24 hours and deaths at 45 while the recoveries surged to 816, the ministry said in a statement.

It highlighted the need of the public abiding by the social distancing and preventive measures.

Last Monday the Tunisian authorities relaxed the lockdowns and allowed some businesses to reopen after the infections dropped to nil. (KUNA)

**ALGIERS:** Up to 198 persons tested positive for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), in past hours, raising whole number of contamination cases with the communicable disease to 7,019, Algerian Ministry of Health said on Sunday.

Six people who had gotten sick with the widespread virus died bringing toll of fatalities to 548.

Meanwhile, the ministry recorded 98 new recovery cases, thus number of patients who were discharged from hospitals amounted to 3,507. Figure of those who remained under treatment stood at 11,754. (KUNA)

**RAMALLAH:** Palestinian Minister of Health May Al-Kaila on Sunday declared five fresh infection cases with the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) in Palestine, raising the tally to 560.

The latest cases were of persons who had mingled with a Palestinian who frequently goes to Israel for work.

They were recorded in the town of Beit Awla in Al-Khalil (Hebron) province. Among those infected was a five-year-old boy, the minister said in a statement.

This brings the total number of confirmed infections with the globally spreading respiratory disease to 560 since the outbreak of the virus in Palestine, she added.

She put number of patients who recovered at 452, some 81 percent of the total count of the infections. (KUNA)

**JERUSALEM:** An Israeli district court on Monday convicted a Jewish extremist of murder in a 2015 arson attack that killed a Palestinian toddler and his parents, a case that had sent shock waves through Israel and helped fuel months of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

The court ruled that the Jewish settler Amiram Ben-Uliel hurled firebombs late one night into a West Bank home in July 2015 as a family slept, killing 18-month-old Ali Dawabsheh. His mother, Riham, and father, Saad, later died of their wounds. Ali's 4-year-old brother Ahmad survived.

"This trial won't bring my family back," Hussein Dawabsheh, the toddler's grandfather, said outside the courtroom in central Israel. "But I don't want another family to go through the trauma that I have."

At the time of the arson killing, Israel was dealing with a wave of vigilante-style attacks by suspected Jewish extremists. But the deadly firebombing in the West Bank village of Duma touched a particularly sensitive nerve.

The attack was condemned across the Israeli political spectrum, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged "zero tolerance" in the fight to bring the assailants to justice. Investigators placed several suspects under "administrative detention," a measure typically reserved for alleged Palestinian militants that allows authorities to hold suspects for months without charge.

"This was an attack with racist motives," said prosecutor Yael Atzmon. "The court ruled it as a terrorist attack and this sends an important message that terror is terror and the identity of the perpetrators is irrelevant."

Critics, however, noted that lesser non-deadly attacks, such as firebombings that damaged mosques and churches, had gone unpunished for years. And as the investigation into the Duma attack dragged on, Palestinians complained of a double-standard, where suspected Palestinian militants are quickly rounded up and prosecuted under a military legal system that gives them few rights while Jewish Israelis are protected by the country's criminal laws. (AP)

**JERUSALEM:** Israeli soldiers on Sunday shot and wounded a man who crossed from Lebanon into Israeli-held territory, the military said.

The Israeli military said the man was taken to an Israeli hospital. His identity and condition were not immediately known, and the army said it was investigating.

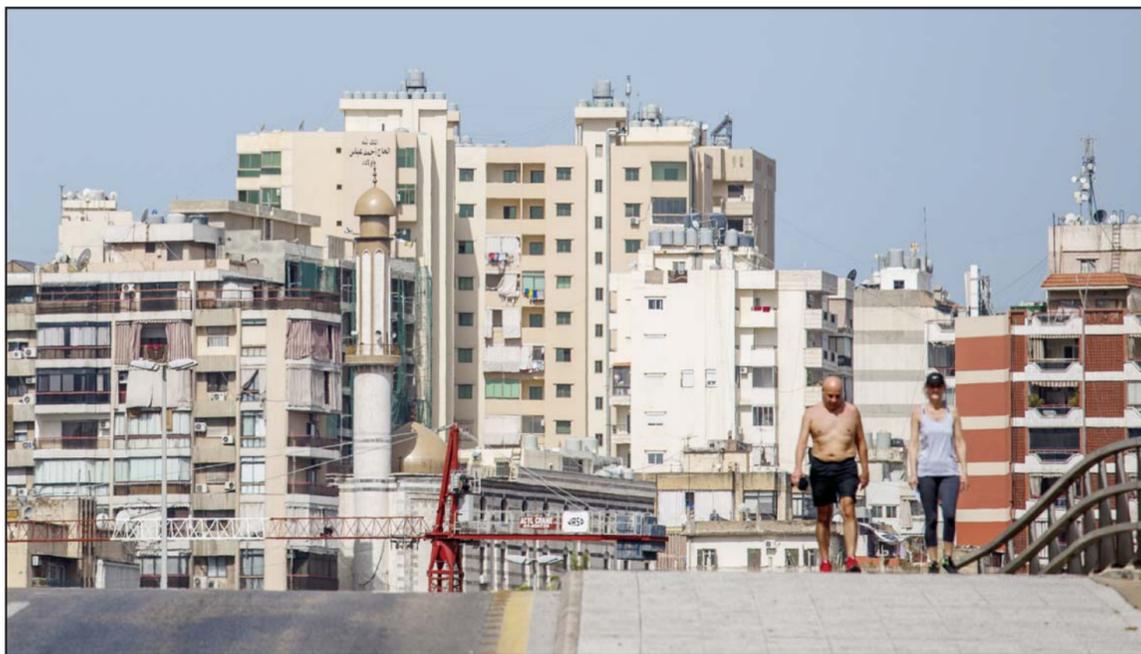
A report in Lebanon said the man was a shepherd who had not crossed the frontier.

The Israeli army said the incident occurred after the man crossed from Lebanon into Shebaa Farms. The area is a disputed enclave along the frontier between Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

Israel says the enclave is part of the Golan Heights, which it captured from Syria in 1967 and later annexed. The U.S. is the only country to have recognized Israel's annexation of the Golan. Lebanon and Syria say Shebaa Farms belong to Lebanon, while the United Nations says the area is part of Syria and that Damascus and Israel should negotiate its final status.

The Lebanese-Israeli frontier has seen tensions rise in recent weeks between Israel and the militant group Hezbollah.

In a statement, the Lebanese army identified the man who was shot as Mohammed Nouredine Abdul-Azim, a shepherd of Syrian origin. It said he was herding goats and sheep near an Israeli post when he was shot and detained. It said the army was following the case with UN peacekeepers. (AP)



People take a walk, as the lockdown due to the coronavirus outbreak continues in Beirut, Lebanon, Sunday, May 17, 2020. The Lebanese government reinstated a four-day nationwide lockdown that started last Wednesday, following a spike in reported coronavirus cases. (AP)

## Iranian tankers carry malign oil to co-sanctioned Venezuela

Pirates attack UK-flagged chemical tanker off Yemen

**DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, May 18, (AP):** Five Iranian tankers likely carrying at least \$45.5 million worth of gasoline and similar products are now sailing to Venezuela, part of a wider deal between the two US-sanctioned nations amid heightened tensions between

Tehran and Washington.

The tankers' voyage came after Venezuela's socialist leader Nicolás Maduro already turned to Iran for help in flying in chemicals needed at an aging refinery amid a gasoline shortage, a symptom of the wider economic and political chaos gripping Latin America's one-time largest oil producer.

## Swearing-in for Israel spawns mini-ministries

**JERUSALEM, May 18, (AP):** After three deadlocked and divisive elections, a year and a half of political paralysis and another three-day delay because of political infighting in his Likud party, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu finally swore in his new government on Sunday. The Knesset, Israel's parliament, passed a vote of confidence in Netanyahu's new administration to end over 500 days of upheaval.

Over the weekend, both Netanyahu and his rival-turned-partner Benny Gantz announced their appointments for the new government — the most bloated in Israeli history with an expected 36 Cabinet ministers and 16 deputies.

Netanyahu and Gantz, a former military chief, announced last month they would be putting their differences aside to join forces to steer the country through the coronavirus crisis and its severe economic fallout.

Their controversial power-sharing deal calls for Netanyahu to serve as prime minister for the government's first 18 months before being replaced by Gantz for the next 18 months. Their blocs will also have a similar number of ministers and mutual veto power over most major decisions.

Critics have already accused the government of being out of touch by creating so many Cabinet posts at a time when unemployment has soared to 25% as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. But because Netanyahu's bloc includes several smaller parties, he still only has a limited number of Cabinet ministries to hand out to the Likud rank and file.

A mini-insurgency by angry senior Likud members forced Netanyahu to seek a delay in the swearing-in ceremony last Thursday. To mollify his backbenchers, Netanyahu created a series of new ministries with questionable responsibilities, such as "community development," "settlement affairs" and "higher education and water resources" and a minister to be the liaison between the parliament and the Cabinet. Each ministry means paying for drivers, staff and office space.

Yair Lapid, the new opposition leader, said the machinations have led to a loss of "trust of the Israeli public."

"The coronavirus is an excuse for a corrupt party at the expense of the taxpayer. After all the empty talk of an 'emergency government,' the government being formed today is the largest and most wasteful in the history of the country," he said. "It's not just the waste, it's the contempt. The complete contempt for the crisis facing the Israeli public."

The deal has already led to the dissolution of Gantz's alliance with Lapid after he reneged on his central campaign promise not to serve under Netanyahu, who has been indicted on corruption charges and faces a criminal trial starting next week. Their much-scrutinized coalition deal could only come after the country's Supreme Court ruled it had no legal grounds to block it.

Gantz and Netanyahu fought to stalemates in three bitter election campaigns over the past year.

After the most recent vote in March, Gantz appeared to secure enough support in parliament to pass legislation that would have barred the indicted Netanyahu from continuing as prime minister. But in a stunning about-face, Gantz agreed to enter a partnership with his arch rival.

Despite the criticism, Gantz argued that teaming with Netanyahu offered the country its only way out of the prolonged stalemate and prevented what would have been a fourth costly election in just over a year.

## Tripoli forces take key base

**CAIRO, May 18, (AP):** Forces allied with Libya's UN-supported government said Monday they have wrested control of a key military base on the outskirts of the country's capital from their rivals trying to capture Tripoli.

The development is a heavy setback for the eastern-based forces under commander Khalifa Hifter, who has been waging a campaign for over a year to take Tripoli from an array of militias in the west, loosely linked to the administration in the capital.

Col Mohamed Gnounou, a spokesman for the Tripoli-allied forces, said they retook the al-Waitya airbase in the city's southwestern desert reaches. He did not provide details. A spokesman for Hifter's forces was not immediately available for comment.

The Tripoli-allied forces have been trying for weeks to take the base, stepping up attacks by Turkish-supplied drones.

Hifter's forces have sustained heavy losses in recent weeks. In April, Tripoli-allied forces seized control of the city of Sabrata and the town of Sorman, west of Tripoli.

The escalation in the fighting comes despite increased international pressure on both sides to return to negotiating a political settlement and to halt the violence over concerns about the spread of the coronavirus. Libya has reported at least 65 cases of the virus, including three deaths.

Hifter's push on Tripoli has mostly stalemated but the turmoil in the oil-rich country has steadily worsened as foreign backers increasingly intervene — despite pledges to the contrary at a high-profile peace summit in Berlin earlier this year.

Turkey has sent armored drones, air defenses and more recently Syrian militants with links to extremist groups to prop up the embattled Tripoli government. Russia, meanwhile, has deployed hundreds of mercenaries to boost Hifter's assault. The United Arab Emirates and Egypt also back Hifter.

For Iran, the tankers represent a way to bring money into its cash-starved Shiite theocracy and put its own pressure on the U.S., which under President Donald Trump has pursued maximalist campaigns against both nations.

But the strategy invites the chance of a renewed confrontation between the Islamic Republic and America both in the Arabian Gulf, which saw a series of escalating incidents often involving the oil industry last year, and wider afield.

"This is like a new one for everyone," said Capt. Ranjith Raja, an analyst who tracks oil shipments by sea at the data firm Refinitiv, of the gasoline shipments. "We haven't seen anything like this before."

All the vessels involved belong to Iranian state-owned or state-linked companies, flying under the Iranian flag. Since a pressure campaign on Iranian vessels began, notably with the temporary seizure of an Iranian tanker last year by Gibraltar, the country's ships have been unable to fly flags of convenience of other nations, a common practice in international shipping.

The ships all appear to have been loaded from refinery near Bandar Abbas, Iran, which makes gasoline, Raja said. The ships then traveled around the Arabian Peninsula and through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea, according to data collected from the ship's Automatic Identification System, or AIS, which acts as a tracking beacon.

One of the vessels, the Clavel, listed its AIS destination as Caracas beginning May 12, according to log data from ship-tracking website MarineTraffic.com. The vessel later changed its destination as "TO ORDER" two days later, though the ship remains on a route that will see it leave the Mediterranean Sea and be in position to sail on to Venezuela.

Another tanker, the Forest, changed its AIS destination to "S. AMERICA TO ORDER" on May 14.

Three others, the Faxon, the Fortune and the Petunia, all appear on routes that could take them to Venezuela. Given the crushing U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran, also-sanctioned Venezuela appears to be the country that would have nothing to lose from accepting the shipments. Raja said Refinitiv had no data on any Iranian gasoline shipment ever going to South America before.

TankerTrackers.com, a website focused on the oil trade at sea, first reported the ships likely were heading to Venezuela.

The capacity of the five ships is some 175,000 metric tons. On the open market, the gasoline and product carried within them would be worth at least \$45.5 million, though Iran likely reached a discounted, non-cash deal with Caracas given the circumstances the two nations face, Raja said.

Meanwhile Pirates attacked a UK-flagged chemical tanker off the coast of Yemen in the Gulf of Aden, Stolt Tankers said.

The vessel's armed guards exchanged fire with two skiffs manned by six armed Pirates, who approached the vessel Stolt Apal at high speed, the company said in a statement.

The vessel's guards disabled one skiff and ended the pursuit. There were no injuries on board, and only the vessel's bridge area sustained minor damage from bullets.

The Stolt Apal was around 75 nautical miles (86 miles/140 kilometres) off Yemen's coast when the attack took place, and it has since resumed its voyage.

This was the ninth reported attack in the Gulf of Aden this year, according to maritime security firm Dryad Global.