

## International

# People have lost hope: Lebanon's only suicide hotline inundated

## Desperation, financial downturn spur mental health crisis

**BEIRUT:** The phones at Lebanon's only suicide hotline hardly ever stop ringing as people grow more and more desperate in the face of a financial downturn that has spurred a mental health crisis. In one call, a father says he is thinking of taking his own life because he is unable to feed his children, and in another, a man recently made homeless says he has lost all hope. There are dozens of such calls every day, and around 1,100 a month, in a nation that has seen an exodus of healthcare specialists and shortages of drugs to treat anxiety, depression and psychosis.

The number of people phoning in has more than doubled since last year, and is expected to continue to grow in the coming months as hopes dim for a battered population pushed to the brink by a seemingly endless succession of woes. One morning this month, "we woke up at 5:30 am to a call from a 31-year-old who is homeless" and feeling suicidal on Beirut's east-west flyover, said Mia Atoui, the co-founder and vice president of Embrace, the NGO that runs the hotline.

Before that, the organisation got a call from a dad living in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley who was feeling suicidal because he had four kids he could no longer afford to feed, she added. "We are receiving similar calls every day... the crisis has worsened enormously," Atoui said higher demand had prompted the organization to extend hotline operations to 21 hours a day, up from 17, with the aim of reaching 24 hours in the coming months.

A free therapy clinic run by the organization is fully booked

until October, with more than 100 people on the waiting list. The number of children phoning in has also risen, with people under the age of 18 accounting for 15 percent of callers in July, up from less than 10 percent in previous months. "A lot of people have lost hope," Atoui said.

### Epidemic of loneliness

Since the start of the country's financial crisis in 2019, the triggers for emotional distress have kept piling up, with the coronavirus pandemic and a monster blast at the Beirut port last year stretching a nation's psyche to its limit. The past four months have seen Lebanon land on even tougher times, with dwindling foreign currency reserves sparking shortages of key imports including fuel, medicine and bread amid around-the-clock power cuts.

With hospitals going out of service and schools at risk of closing down, Lebanese have fled the country en masse, leading to an epidemic of loneliness on top of the misery that now plagues daily life. Fadi Maalouf, the head of the psychiatry department at the prestigious American University of Beirut Medical Centre, said he has seen an upsurge in the load of patients coming in for treatment. "We are definitely seeing more anxiety and depression, but also more advanced conditions," he said. The situation, Maalouf said, had been worsened by a dual dilemma.

The bulk of mental health specialists have left, leaving patients struggling to find expert help, while shortages of antidepressants,



BEIRUT: Magalie Eid, a volunteer operator, answers calls at Embrace, an NGO which runs a suicide-prevention hotline, in Lebanon's capital Beirut. —AFP

mood stabilizers, and anti-anxiety medication have interrupted treatment for many. "We saw patients who cut down on their treatment so that the supply they have would last longer, and they came to us in our outpatient clinic with a worsening of their condition," Maalouf said. "We even saw patients who decided to stop their treatment and they become more severely depressed, even suicidal, and they ended up in our emergency room," he added. "These are all patients who were previously stable." —AFP

## Timeline: Tunisia's authoritarian slide

**TUNIS:** In the decade since Tunisia's toppling of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali sparked the Arab Spring, the North African country has had almost as many governments. But fears of a regression to authoritarian rule are growing with President Kais Saied taking powers that will allow him to rule by decree. Here is a timeline:

### 2019: Saied elected

Saied, a retired law professor and political outsider, is elected president on September 15, 2019 after his elderly predecessor dies in office. The populist conservative is swept to power on a wave of public outrage against political parties seen as corrupt and self-serving, taking nearly 73 percent of the vote. The populist conservative also has support from across the spectrum including the then ruling Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party.

### 2021: July 25 protests

Thousands of Tunisians join protest marches against the government led by parliament's largest faction, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, as COVID deaths surge to one of the highest per capita rates in the world.

### Parliament suspended, PM ousted

That night Saied suspends parliament for 30 days and dismisses Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi. Saied, who officially heads the army, says he will pick a new prime minister and lift parliamentary immunity, and warns armed opposition will be met with a "rain of bullets". Saied's supporters flood the streets

of the capital Tunis and sound car horns while fireworks light up the sky. The move comes after a prolonged deadlock between Saied, the prime minister and Ennahdha leader Rached Ghannouchi, which crippled management of the pandemic.

### 'Coup'

Ennahdha slams Saied's actions as a "coup d'etat against the revolution and the constitution." The following day Ghannouchi leads a sit-in after the army blocks him from entering parliament. Later his and Saied's supporters clash outside the building. Police close the Tunis office of Qatari news channel Al Jazeera. The Gulf state is close to Ennahdha.

### 'Danger to the state'

With Washington and Paris calling for a swift return to parliamentary democracy, Saied announces an anti-corruption drive on July 28, targeting 460 businessmen he accuses of graft during Ben Ali's rule. On August 24, President Saied extends his suspension of parliament saying it and "the other political institutions are a danger to the state as they are." His opponents warn he is establishing an "autocratic regime". Human rights groups warn of restrictions on freedoms and the European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell says he had made his concerns known to the Tunisian president.

### Rule by decree

On Wednesday, Saied took exceptional powers that will effectively allow him to rule by decree, concentrating authority in the hands of the presidency at the expense of parliament and the prime minister's office. Ennahdha says Saied's power grab risks "dismantling the state". Meanwhile, police arrest lawmaker Seifeddine Makhoulouf, a critic of Saied who heads an ultraconservative Islamist party, for the second time in barely a week, for "undermining the dignity of the army". —AFP

## Tunisia's Saied issues decree strengthening presidential powers

**TUNIS:** Tunisian President Kais Saied took exceptional measures on Wednesday that strengthen the powers of his office at the expense of the government and parliament, which he will effectively replace with rule by decree. The provisions, laid out in a series of articles published in the official gazette, come almost two months after his initial power grab.

Under the current system most of the executive power was in the hands of the government, and the measures announced by Saied clearly tip the balance in favor of the presidency. "Legislative texts will be promulgated in the form of decrees signed by the President of the Republic," one of the articles stipulates. A second article says that "the President shall exercise executive power with the help of a Council of Ministers chaired by a Head of Government". "The President of the Republic presides over the Council of Ministers and may mandate the Head of Government to replace him/her," says another.

Saied, a political outsider, came to power in 2019 on a wave of public outrage against political parties widely seen as corrupt and self-serving. An austere legal academic, the 63-year-old president has shown little inclination to negotiation or compromise, even in the midst of the country's social and health crises. —AFP