

Protests against detention of Lebanese activist Kinda Al-Khatib

Fri, 2020-12-18 00:16

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Army formed a tight security cordon around the vicinity of the Military Court in Beirut on Thursday as family and friends of Lebanese activist Kinda Al-Khatib protested outside. On December 14, Al-Khatib was sentenced to three years in prison with hard labor and the removal of her civil rights for collaborating with Israel.

The protesters carried pictures of activist Al-Khatib and banners quoting her anti-Hezbollah stance, including: "There is no weapon but Lebanese weapons." The protesters allege that Al-Khatib's sentence is politically motivated "because she revolted against the dictatorship of the ruling authority and parties in power."

Al-Khatib's attorney, Joceline Rahi, said Al-Khatib would appeal her sentence, adding that her client is innocent of any crime.

Al-Khatib said in her testimony that a person called Roy Qaisi had contacted her on Twitter, saying he was a journalist working for Israeli Channel 11, and that when she found out he was Israeli, she informed the Lebanese security forces.

Asked why she had not blocked him, Al-Khatib said she believed her phone would be "under security surveillance," and that there was nothing suspicious about her. All her accounts were public, she added.

Al-Khatib denied travelling to Israel, meeting with any Israelis, or providing Israel with any security information.

On Wednesday the Permanent Military Court, headed by Brig. Gen. Munir Shehadeh, issued two sentences in absentia against the famous singer Fadl Shaker, sentencing him to 22 years in prison with hard labor and stripping him of his civil rights.



Singer Fadl Shaker sentenced to 22 years in prison with hard labor for 'involvement in acts of terrorism'

The first ruling sentenced Shaker to 15 years in prison for "involvement in acts of terrorism committed by terrorists with his knowledge by providing logistical services to them." The second ruling sentenced him to seven years in prison and fined him 5 million Lebanese pounds for financing Ahmed Al-Assir's militant group.

Shaker was sentenced in 2017 to 15 years in prison with hard labor as part of the sentences against Ahmed Al-Assir for the Abra battles of 2013. Al-Assir and his supporters in Sidon had fought at the time against the Lebanese Army.

Shaker has been in hiding since, but has spoken several times to the media to claim that he was innocent. If Shaker surrenders himself to the judiciary, he will be retried while present at the trial.

Meanwhile, Judge Fadi Sawan, the judicial investigator in the Beirut port blast, suspended all investigations related to the case for a period of 10 days, pending the ruling of the Court of Cassation after two former ministers, Ghazi Zaiter and Ali Hassan Khalil, refused to appear before him and requested his removal from the case after Sawan accused them of negligence and causing the deaths of dozens.

On the same day, a delegation of the victims' families met with Interior Minister Brig. Gen. Mohammad Fahmy to demand that the case not be politicized.

In a new scandal linked to Beirut port, the Lebanese army has discovered around 700 containers that have been in the port since 2005 and have no identifying documents or description of their contents. The Ministry of Finance has decided to have those containers inspected by the army and the customs authority.

French President Emmanuel Macron had called off his scheduled visit to Lebanon next week, having tested positive for COVID-19.

Hossam Zaki, Assistant Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, visited Lebanon on Thursday and met with several of officials. He said that resolving the political and economic complications facing Lebanon was the responsibility of Lebanese officials “because the Arab League will not be a substitute for any Lebanese party, but it will be a supportive party if the Lebanese desire.”



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Lebanon jails activist Kinda Al-Khatib for ‘collaborating’ with Israel
Lebanon to get first batch of COVID-19 vaccines in two months, minister says

[Turkey quits more observation posts in Syria's Idlib](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-18 00:03

ANKARA: Turkey is believed to be stepping up troop withdrawals in Syria's northwest Idlib province, the last major rebel stronghold in the country.

In the past, Ankara has strongly rejected any possibility of abandoning its contested observation posts, but with a major Assad regime offensive looking increasingly likely, there is no longer any strategic value in keeping the sites, observers say.

Turkey recently began evacuating its observation post at Al-Eis in northern Syria following prolonged attacks in the region by Russian-backed regime forces and Iranian-backed militias seeking control over the highway connecting Aleppo and Latakia provinces.

Analysts say that the move is a strong signal that Turkey's opening of observation posts as part of the Astana deal has failed.

Idlib is located in a so-called de-escalation zone established under the 2017 deal between Turkey, Russia and Iran.

Eight out of 12 observation points controlled by Turkey have been encircled by Russian and Iranian forces since late last year.

"Several other Turkish observation posts already have been encircled by Russian and Iranian backed forces. The remaining posts are in areas controlled by rebels," Halid Abdurrahman, a researcher on the Middle East and North Africa, told Arab News.

"These observation posts do not have any critical importance," he said.

Since October, Turkey has abandoned four observation posts and two military positions in Idlib.

"It was clear that these observation points would fail because under the Astana deal three countries had their own interests which often clash. Now the key question is whether Turkey will use its military presence in Idlib for defensive or offensive purposes," Abdurrahman said.

In early December, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) agreed with Russia and the Syrian army to set up three joint observation posts in the Kurdish-controlled town of Ain Issa to monitor the cease-fire agreed under the 2019 Sochi deal between Russia and Turkey that required the Kurdish forces to pull back 32 km from the Turkish border.

Samuel Ramani, a Middle East analyst at the University of Oxford, believes that the Russia-SDF joint observation posts have angered Turkey since power sharing with the SDF is even more problematic for Ankara than handing the territory over to the Assad regime.

"The encirclement of Turkish forces in Idlib has been strongly supported by the Assad regime since the summer of 2019 and frictions on this issue precede the October 2019 Operation Peace Spring campaign in northern Syria," he told Arab News.

Turkey reportedly keeps thousands of troops in northwestern Syria apart from Ankara-backed rebel forces.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, said that the Astana process is "frozen, but not dead yet."

"These are observation points, not military locations. Now they are surrounded by regime forces and would be at the mercy of any kind of

provocative attack from the regime,” he told Arab News.

According to Saban, in the case of a major offensive in the region, the observation points would present a major security challenge for Turkey.

“Their main goal was to observe any violation from the regime. The area is now under the regime control. So it is not useful to keep them staffed and spend money on their resupply,” he said.

In October, Turkey also evacuated the observation post at Morek in Hama province, one of a dozen established in 2018. It was later surrounded by Syrian government forces.

With Idlib home to 3.6 million people, Turkey’s priority now is to prevent any potential refugee influx amid harsh winter conditions.



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Turkey will not step back on S-400 missile systems despite US sanctions
Alarm bells ring again at UN over humanitarian crisis in Syria

Latest bid to resolve Arab-Qatari relationship crisis ends in failure: Egypt

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-18 00:04

CAIRO: Renewed attempts by Kuwait on behalf of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt at reconciliation with Qatar have failed to reach an agreement.

Bassam Rady, spokesman for the Egyptian presidency, on Wednesday told a talk show on Sada El-Balad TV that the latest mediation moves to help defuse tensions between the four Arab countries and the Qataris had been unsuccessful.

The quartet cut diplomatic, trade, and travel ties with Qatar in mid-2017 and has since called on Doha to meet 13 demands in order to allow for a resumption of relations. These range from closing state-owned media company Al Jazeera and a Turkish base to severing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and decreasing links with Iran.

“When Qatar responds to these demands with a sincere desire and strong political will, things will change,” Rady said.

Saudi Arabia recently indicated that a solution to the dispute was within reach as did Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry.

He said: “Egypt thanks the Kuwaiti role to heal the dispute ... Egypt is following up the commendable efforts of Kuwait to bring Arab countries closer. We hope that the dispute will be bridged between the Arab countries. Egypt is always working to strengthen Arab cooperation.

“We will see what can be achieved in this regard, and as long as it fulfils the interests of the Arab countries and Egypt, there will be an important development. We greatly value the efforts of the state of Kuwait and the Kuwaiti leadership,” the minister added.

Separately, official spokesman for the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Hafez, also expressed Egypt’s appreciation for the continued efforts made by Kuwait to resolve the Gulf relationship crisis.

“We hope that these kind efforts will result in a comprehensive solution that addresses all of the crisis’ causes and ensures strict and serious commitment to what will be agreed upon,” he said.

Hafez pointed out that Egypt, based on its responsibilities and position, always prioritized the preservation of Arab solidarity, stability, and security.

The Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) recently reported that Kuwait was anticipating “fruitful talks” aimed at achieving “Gulf and Arab stability.”



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Alleged Qatari expert ‘does not rule out’ French intelligence role in Samuel Paty murder
Qatar comes to Turkey’s ‘rescue’ amid public outcry

[Yemen will fight corruption and currency woes, says prime minister](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-17 23:14

AL-MUKALLA: Institutional corruption and a spiralling currency will be among the targets of Yemen’s new government, Prime Minister-designate Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed said.

Speaking after a meeting with party leaders and the parliamentary speaker on Wednesday, Saeed said the new administration will focus on reviving Yemen’s economy, halting the depreciation of the riyal, alleviating the suffering of Yemenis and combating corruption in state institutions.

Devaluation of the riyal has hit ordinary Yemenis, while uncontrolled currency speculation has damaged the economy, he said.

“We are confronting a multidimensional battle. It is not only military but also economic, humanitarian and developmental. The new government represents the will of the people, and will face challenges with courage and resolute measures,” he said.

Saaed said that his government will apply radical reforms aimed at boosting revenues and improving financial management.

Under the Riyadh Agreement designed to end hostilities between the internationally recognized government and separatists in southern Yemen, the Yemeni president in July mandated the outgoing prime minister to form a new unity government that will include separatist Southern Transitional Council.

On Wednesday, the Yemeni army and separatists said they had completed the military components of the agreements after withdrawing their forces from flash points in the southern province of Abyan under the supervision of Saudi monitors.

The Yemeni riyal has tumbled from 500 against the dollar in January 2018 – when tensions between the Yemeni government and separatists erupted into sporadic military clashes – to 920 this month.

The currency rebounded on Thursday after the Arab coalition announced the beginning of implementation of the Riyadh Agreement.

In the western city of Taiz, hundreds of protesters demanded the government take immediate steps to halt rising prices and the devaluation of the riyal.

Led by local labor and human rights unions, protesters carried posters urging the government to address worsening economic conditions and improve people’s lives.

“The fall of the currency is a direct killing of the Yemeni citizen,” one poster read. “Silence about high prices and a falling currency is premeditated murder,” another read.

In Riyadh, the Yemeni government repeated its demands to the UN mission to relocate its main office from Houthi-controlled areas in the western province of Hodeidah to a “neutral” area in the country.

Yemen’s Foreign Minister Mohammed Al-Hadrami told Daniela Crosslake, deputy head of the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement, that the Houthis are obstructing UN monitors in Hodeidah and violating the Stockholm Agreement.

The UN mission in Yemen is unable to work freely since its main office is inside Houthi territory, he said.

Yemen’s government has boycotted the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) that monitors a truce in Hodeidah since March when a Houthi sniper

killed a government soldier.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed in shelling or by land mines planted by the Houthis in Hodeidah since late 2018 when the government and the militia signed the Stockholm Agreement, local right groups say.



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Aden-Abyan road reopened as Yemeni government, separatists finish redeployment process
Protesters call for Houthis' designation as a terrorist group after death of Yemeni football coach and son

[Egypt welcomes UAE joining Eastern Mediteranean Gas Forum](#)

Thu, 2020-12-17 22:24

CAIRO: Egypt has welcomed the UAE's entry into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), according to a spokesman for President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

Bassam Radi said the Egyptian leader had also expressed the importance of the added value that the UAE would bring to the group.

"The president welcomes the UAE's accession to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum as an observer, along with the founding member states, expressing the importance of the added value that the UAE will contribute to the forum's activities to serve strategic interests and enhance cooperation and partnership between the forum countries," said Radi.

Talks were held on Wednesday between the Egyptian president and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed to discuss issues in the region and issues of cooperation between the two countries.

A high-level EMGF working group held its eighth meeting to discuss organizational matters to activate the forum's activities, including reviewing the position of the headquarters agreement to be concluded between Egypt and the forum, and procedures for adding new members and observers.

The Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum said the meeting also discussed the forum's road map during 2021. It included the work plan of the Gas Industry Advisory Committee and the detailed plans of its three technical, economic and organizational subcommittees.

The meeting approved the requests for two additional members to join the committee, bringing the number of members to 29 from the most important companies and institutions concerned with the region's gas industry, compared to 16 members when it was launched in November last year.

It was the first meeting to be held after the final signing of the forum's charter by the seven founding countries – Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt – in September and its ratification by Egypt's parliament on Tuesday.

On Sept. 22, the Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources announced the signing of a charter to convert the EMGF into a regional organization based in Cairo. The signing was attended by ministers of the forum.

The organization is interested in strengthening cooperation and developing the political dialogue on natural gas in order to contribute to the economic exploitation of the countries' reserves of the resource.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hami Aksoy, described the EMGF as an anti-Ankara bloc considering its transformation into an international organization.

Turkey is in a dispute with Greece over maritime and energy rights in the eastern Mediterranean.



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Egypt and UAE discuss Eastern Mediterranean Turkey's belligerence roils gas-rich eastern Mediterranean