

Iraqis shed masks as economic pain overshadows virus fear

Wed, 2020-12-16 00:16

BAGHDAD: While much of the world fears COVID-19, Iraqis have mostly stopped wearing face masks as they worry more about the pandemic's economic impact than the virus itself.

In a war-scarred country burdened by rising job losses and deepening poverty, a majority of citizens seem to have shrugged off the global public health crisis.

In one Baghdad pharmacy, cartons of surgical masks, transparent face shields and disinfectant bottles have piled up despite being on sale at slashed prices.

"There's a general sense that the pandemic has died down and that has led to being people negligent," said Nafea Firas, 23, who works at the pharmacy in the capital's Zayuna district.

Most Iraqis' minds are now far more focused on the economic hardship caused by plummeting oil revenues and huge delays in payments of state salaries and pensions.

The poverty rate has jumped from 20 percent to 31.7 percent this year, said a recent joint study by the UN children's agency UNICEF and the World Bank.

Meanwhile infection rates and deaths have indeed fallen, according to Health Ministry data, in an encouraging trend epidemiologists struggle to explain.

Out of 30,000 tests on December 12, only about 1,000 were positive, down from over 5,000 in a single day in September. The daily death toll fell to 16 from about 70 three months ago.

As Iraq worries less about the coronavirus, most people who entered Firas's pharmacy ignored a sign asking them to cover their faces, or a disinfectant dispenser at the door.

A rare customer who did wear a mask, a retired soldier, said: "When I walk the streets with my wife and we're both wearing masks, people look at us as if we're doing something wrong."

Iraq recorded its first COVID-19 cases in February and imposed a full lockdown the following month, with airports, land borders, schools, government offices and all public gathering places shuttered until the summer.

Authorities announced a 50,000 dinar (about \$35) fine for unmasked commuters, but it was barely enforced.

At the same time, the government has struggled with its worst financial crisis in decades, as oil prices fell sharply.

The state was no longer able to pay its employees or pensioners on time, leaving the livelihoods of entire families hanging in the balance.

Firas, at the pharmacy, said he favors enforcing mask use with fines but acknowledged that “the state wouldn’t be able to impose it, particularly in the lower-income neighborhoods. “And fines would hurt vulnerable people more.”

A Baghdad grocer said that large families simply could not afford the masks, disinfectant spray and other hygiene products, even at their reduced prices.

“Abiding by all these hygiene protocols would require financial capabilities that the poor simply don’t have,” he told AFP.

Efforts to help the poor have meanwhile been hampered by Iraq’s infamous bureaucracy. Some 200,000 sets of masks and gloves have been stuck at a southern Iraqi port since August due to paperwork delays at the customs authority, a senior official from the International Federation of the Red Cross said.

“These are to protect the people who can’t afford buying masks or gloves – the most in need, who live in crowded places where physical distancing or water and soap are not available enough,” the official said.

Firas recalled similar delays in the early days of the pandemic.

He said there were only two groups of people in Iraq who were known to be committed to use of the medical masks.

First, anti-government protesters who hit the streets last year donned the masks to protect themselves from tear gas fired by security forces.

“I used to carry hundreds of masks and distribute them in Tahrir Square,” Firas said.



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Iraq extends curfew in Baghdad to contain disease
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[Months after his death, Egyptian Dr. Mashaly's clinic for the poor reopens](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-16 00:11

CAIRO: Only a few months after the death of Muhammad Mashaly, an Egyptian doctor who was famous for treating the poor for free or for a minimal fee, his clinic has reopened.

Hosni Qutb, an Egyptian doctor, decided to reopen the clinic in the northern city of Tanta, where Mashaly used to treat patients at a maximum price of 10 Egyptian pounds (\$0.63). Qutb announced the reopening following an agreement with Mashaly's family.

Hundreds of patients would queue in front of the clinic due to Mashaly's

widespread reputation for treating people for such a small fee.

He passed away on July 28 after a sudden decrease in blood pressure. He was born in 1944 and graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University in 1967. Mashaly held positions in hospitals in Gharbia governorate.

He said he decided to devote himself to treating the poor because, having come from a similar background, he related to their suffering. "I grew up poor ... I don't want to wear expensive clothes or travel in a 10-meter-long car," Mashaly once said.

Qutb said: "When the clinic was reopened ... we immediately informed them (patients) that we'd keep Mashaly's fee, and whoever can't pay can get examined for free." He has refurbished the clinic and added medical equipment.



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[Iraqi activist shot dead in Baghdad](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-15 23:48

BAGHDAD: An Iraqi anti-government protester was shot dead in east Baghdad by masked gunmen on Tuesday evening, according to a security source, a medic and an activist network.

Salah al-Iraqi was well-known for his active role in the rallies that erupted in Iraq's capital and the Shiite-majority south last year, slamming the government as corrupt, inefficient and beholden to neighbouring Iran.

Iraqi was killed in the capital's Baghdad al-Jadida district, according to a medic, a security source and the Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM), a collection of activists who reported on the protests and their aftermath. All three sources confirmed to AFP that Iraqi died on his arrival at the nearby Sheikh Zayed hospital.

Baghdad al-Jadida is a few kilometres (miles) from Tahrir Square, the epicentre of the capital's protests from where Iraqi, always energetic, would broadcast live footage.

INSM said he had already been targeted twice before Tuesday's shooting.

In his last post on Facebook on Tuesday afternoon, Iraqi had written: "The innocent die while the cowards rule."

Nearly 600 people have lost their lives in protest-related violence since rallies began in October 2019, including young organisers who were shot dead. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi, who came to power in May after street pressure forced the previous premier to resign, has pledged to protect rallies and arrest those responsible for past violence.

But last week, eight local and international rights groups said they were worried about "the lack of accountability for the extrajudicial executions that have taken place this year, targeting individuals for their peaceful expression."

The authorities' "failure" to bring the perpetrators to justice was "perpetuating and further entrenching decades of impunity that have left brave individuals without the most basic protection," the groups said, which included Amnesty and Human Rights Watch.

HRW on Tuesday cited the recent case of Arshad Heibat Fakhry. The 31-year-old has not been heard from since he was detained by unidentified armed men in November.

HRW said Kadhemi's government "has precious little to show for these promises, and disappearances have continued."



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[Turkish rights activist Kavala's prison term extended](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-15 23:38

ANKARA: Turkey's top court has again delayed the appeal of Turkish philanthropist and activist, Osman Kavala, for release from his detention of more than three years, despite the fact he has not not been convicted on any charge.

On Tuesday, the First Chamber of Turkish Constitutional Court deferred the application of Kavala to the Grand Chamber. It is the second time that the court has delayed his appeal. Experts note that the move is to gain time before the jailed rights defender's first trial begins on Dec. 18 at a heavy penal court in Istanbul.

Rights activists, international community and opposition parties have been urging the release of Kavala, who was arrested in the wake of an attempted coup in 2016.

He was accused of organizing the anti-government Gezi protests in 2013 and

attempting to change the constitutional order and to overthrow the government. Having been acquitted in the trial in February, Kavala was arrested again on the same day, this time on charges of “political or military espionage” – “surreal” charges that he denies.

Kavala applied to the Turkish top court arguing that “his right to personal liberty and security was violated as his arrest was unlawful.”

“Osman Kavala has been held in detention for over three years without any credible evidence of having committed a crime,” said Gina S. Lentine, senior program officer for Europe and Eurasia at Freedom House.

Freedom House has repeatedly urged the Turkish government to release Kavala.

“His case is emblematic and represents the stories of thousands of other activists, journalists, scholars, writers, artists, political figures, lawyers, and others who have been subjected to politically motivated proceedings in response to exercising their fundamental right to free expression,” Lentine told Arab News.

Last December, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Kavala’s “politically motivated” prolonged pretrial detention was not lawful and was serving “other purposes.” Turkey is a contracting party to the European court and is obliged to follow its rulings.

In its ruling, the court underlined that “in the absence of other relevant and sufficient circumstances, the mere fact that the applicant had had contacts with a suspected person or with foreign nationals cannot be considered as sufficient evidence to satisfy an objective observer that he (Kavala) could have been involved in an attempt to overthrow the constitutional order.”

“The European Court of Human Rights is one of the few remaining tools that civil society in Turkey has to hold its government accountable for rights violations, which is why its rulings are so important,” Lentine said.

“It is deeply concerning that the Turkish government refuses to respond to the European Court’s judgments and begs the question as to how the Council of Europe can more forcefully hold Turkey accountable for flouting the conventions to which it is party, like the European Convention on Human Rights,” she said.

Bulent Arinc, a confidant of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, resigned last month from the government’s high advisory council after making controversial remarks about judicial reform in Turkey. He called for the release of Kavala from prison, saying charges against the philanthropist were baseless.

Turkey is expected to prioritize judicial reform in early 2021, but no improvement on Kavala’s situation is expected after recent remarks by Erdogan saying “he would never defend Kavala” as he considers him the sponsor behind the 2013 protests.

Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) lawmaker, Utku Cakirozer, said the Tuesday ruling produced another violation of rights for Kavala by extending the imprisonment period.

"They are sending the balls to each other to prolong his victimization despite all previous rulings from the European top court. It is unacceptable to keep someone behind bars for 1,148 days," he told Arab News.

According to Cakirozer, the Kavala case has turned into a symbol of the state of the rule of law in Turkey.

"It is a case that undermines Turkey's international claims in terms of democratization and rule of law," he said.

Lentine from Freedom House agrees.

"It is concerning that the Turkish Constitutional Court, another one of the few remaining tools civil society can use to advocate for accountability and the rule of law domestically, has delayed its ruling to enforce the European Court's judgments on Kavala," she said. "This delay creates the impression that the Constitutional Court is simply waiting for the local court's decision on Dec. 18 in order to make their decision."



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Turkish philanthropist Osman Kavala re-arrested after acquittal in landmark

Leading Turkish activist charged with trying to overthrow government:
media

[US to pursue expanding Israel pipeline to Arab world](#)

Tue, 2020-12-15 23:01

CHICAGO: The peace accords that Israel has signed with the UAE and Bahrain will serve as a foundation to expand energy trade, US Energy Secretary Daniel Brouillette said on Tuesday.

The Trump administration is moving quickly to invite other Arab nations – including Oman, Sudan, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia and Jordan – to partner with Israel to expand its Trans-Israel Pipeline (TIPLINE) to carry oil and include other energy resources, Brouillette added.

The pipeline extends from the Gulf of Aqaba in southern Israel to the Mediterranean port of Ashkelon just north of the Gaza Strip.

The TIPLINE was built in 1968, originally in partnership with the shah of Iran, to sidestep oil deliveries through the Suez Canal. Israel later worked with Russia to supply oil to Asian countries.

“There has been some good work done ... on the movement of gas throughout the region between Israel and Egypt,” Brouillette said.

“We think there are some opportunities ... for the movement of both crude oil and perhaps other products in that pipeline (TIPLINE).”

Brouillette said the exchange between Israel and its Arab neighbors could also include other energy sources, adding: “We do think there are some opportunities with regard to the movement of electricity.”

He spoke of “the enormous opportunity that we have for ... the development of hydrogen and movement of hydrogen throughout the region. There seems to be a fair amount of interest in those technologies as well.”

Brouillette said the Abraham Accords signed by Israel, the UAE and Bahrain will allow the expansion of agreements with other Arab countries to begin in January.

He said he could not speculate on what “any new administration that might come down the road” might do, but he expects the progress to continue.

“I know Egypt has a great relationship with Israel. They’ve conducted some conversations under an organization called the EasternMed Gas Forum. We expect those types of conversations will continue,” he added.

The US goal and interest is to “produce energy and make it available to the region, but also to create economic opportunities for Egypt, for Israel, for others who wish to provide natural gas or perhaps crude oil to the others in the world,” he said.

Brouillette added that his department is exploring expanding renewable energy discussions throughout the Middle East, Europe and Asia. He said the Abraham Accords include an energy agreement to pursue these goals.



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[Trans-Israel Pipeline \(TIPLINE\)](#)

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