

'In our hearts': Radio keeps Syria refugees in Iraq close to home

Author:

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ARBAT, Iraq: Speaking into a microphone in her modest studio, Sherin Mohammad goes live with the news. But this is no typical radio station: Gardenya FM is run by, and for, Syrian refugees.

Broadcast from the refugee camp of Arbat in northeast Iraq, Gardenya FM features news programs and talk shows, produced by a team far from their native Syria.

Nearly 500 km away from her home town of Qamishli, Sherin concludes her news roundup, waits for the catchy jingle to end and sets down her clunky headphones on a white wooden desk.

The 31-year-old fled Qamishli in 2014 so she could stay with her husband, desperate to avoid the military conscription imposed by the Syrian government.

Their painful displacement came with a silver lining: She could realize her lifelong dream of being a journalist.

"I wanted to be a reporter back in Syria but it wasn't on offer at my local university, so I became a teacher," she told AFP.

In 2018, Italian NGO UPP proposed setting up a local radio station in Arbat, and Sherin jumped at the opportunity.

She has dedicated herself since then to providing reliable information to fellow refugees on the Syrian conflict, which erupted in 2011 with protests against the regime Bashar Assad.

The war has profoundly divided communities both inside and outside Syria, with various sides trading accusations of fabricating news.

Sherin wants to be the antidote.

"Everyone has smartphones and they can read any old thing published about Syria," she said, including "fake news spread by the regime."

Gardenya broadcasts locally at 101.3 FM, but the team also posts on the station's Facebook page, which has several thousand likes.

Through it, Sherin said, loved ones still in Syria could see what life is like for Arbat's 9,056 residents, many of whom sensed their displacement would be long-term and began replacing tarp tents with cinderblock structures in 2017.

"We want to give real information to those still in our homeland through our Facebook page so that people see we don't live in tents," she added.

Strolling through these one-room cement homes with a bounce in his step is Khalil, another Gardenya FM reporter.

He is well-known: Fellow refugees greeted him warmly, and someone handed him a flatbread with thyme for breakfast. Youssef, a 19-year-old trainee, trailed behind.

"This is how you build a network," Khalil explained to him.

"We use our friends, our relatives, our journalist colleagues who are in the country and those on the front" to gather information, said Khalil.

But for the former English teacher from Amuda in northeast Syria, the most

interesting people to speak to are the Syrian Kurds who travel back and forth between their homeland and safe haven in Arbat.

One of them, Goran, was Gardenya FM's latest interview subject.

Covered in flour after a long morning making flatbreads to sell in the camp, Goran answers Khalil's questions, then has a few of his own: Is the border still open? Could he travel back to check on his wife, still stuck in their Syrian home town?

"With Covid-19, we have little information. The radio can tell us every day what's going on," Goran said.

Although Goran misses his family, he said he couldn't imagine trying to live in Syria again.

"Why move back? There's no electricity, no salary, the US dollar is so expensive," he said.

"At least here, there's work," he told AFP from his cinderblock bakery.

According to the International Organization for Migration, there are 230,000 Syrian refugees living in northern Iraq, 40 percent of them in camps, with the rest in rented homes or other housing arrangements. Officially, none have permanently returned to Syria.

The Syrian regime is hosting a summit on Wednesday and Thursday to encourage returns, with 5.5 million Syrians still seeking refuge outside their homeland. But infrastructure and public services are lacking across the war-ravaged country and rights defenders warn that some areas are still unsafe for large-scale repatriations.

"Syria remains in our hearts," said Khalil.

"Building (Arbat) with our own means is our way of saying that we can rebuild a Syria without Assad," he added.

"That's what the radio is for, too."



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German woman charged over crimes against humanity in SyriaLebanon holds 'productive' sea border talks with Israel, joins conference on Syrian refugees

[UN warns of 'ecological disaster' in Houthi-controlled Red Sea area](#)

Thu, 2020-11-12 22:23

LONDON: UN human rights experts have demanded access to an abandoned oil tanker off the coast of Yemen that say poses a risk of causing an "ecological catastrophe" in the Red Sea.

The tanker, FSO Safer, lies in waters controlled by the Iran-backed Houthis near the port of Hodeidah, where it currently holds an estimated 1.1 million barrels of oil.

The ship, launched in 1976, is decaying rapidly after being abandoned in 2015 when its engine room flooded with seawater.

Both the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthis agreed to grant access to the vessel to independent experts in 2018, formally requesting the UN's assistance.

Since then, however, relevant permits from local authorities in the Houthi-controlled area have not been granted.

"It is vital that a UN technical team be permitted to board the FSO Safer if we are to have any hope of preventing the threat of a spill that could be four times worse than the historic Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska in 1989," said Marcos Orellana, UN special rapporteur on toxics and human rights.

"Has the world learned nothing from the devastating explosion at the port of Beirut in Lebanon in August? Surely the dangers of mishandling hazardous substances are now evident," he added.

"If this ship were to break up, a spill could decimate livelihoods of local coastal communities, biodiversity in the region, and heavily impact shipping routes in the Red Sea," he said.

"A UN technical team should be given all necessary means to assess the dilapidated tanker and conclusively avert the threat of a spill from the dilapidated tanker."

David Boyd, special rapporteur for human rights and environment, said: "An oil spill would harm the rights to life, health and a healthy environment for some 1.6 million Yemenis."

He added: "This is a tragedy in the making and it must be prevented at all costs from hitting the people of Yemen. They have suffered enough."



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Saudi Arabia warns UN of oil in Red Sea near abandoned tanker
Yemen minister: UN failed to convince Houthis to allow access to decaying oil tanker

[Iran and Turkey 'losers' in emerging new Middle East order, say analysts](#)

Fri, 2020-11-13 00:02

DUBAI: Turkey and Iran are the big "losers" of the normalization of relations between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel, but the treaties signed by the three countries are not directed against any third party, according to participants in the just concluded Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate.

A key takeaway from three days of discussions was that the Abraham Accords

are about solving the Arab-Israeli conflict and approaching it in a strategic and realistic way, while creating momentum for peace in the entire Middle East.

Organized by the Emirates Policy Centre, the seventh edition of the annual debate featured virtual panel discussions in which strategic experts, researchers and policy-makers participated from all over the world.

Taking part in a debate on Wednesday entitled “Middle East between Political Rationality and Delusions,” Khalifa Shaheen Al-Marar, UAE assistant minister for political affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, put it this way: “The Abraham Accords represent a massive and ongoing project; the more we get tangible results from the agreement, the more we incentivize finding peaceful solutions to ongoing conflicts.”

He added: “To build on the success and momentum of the accords, we need renewed efforts in finding a solution for the Palestinian peace process based on a two-state solution.”



Palestinian youths lift portraits of late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat during a rally by Fatah supporters to mark the 16th anniversary of his death, in the West Bank city of Ramallah on November 11, 2020. (AFP)

Two experts who took part in a separate panel discussion on Wednesday entitled “Decoding the Region in the Aftermath of the Treaty” called for more dialogue among the signatories to the Abraham Accords and other Middle East countries with a view to begin de-escalation of regional tensions.

“I see Iran as a loser in the sense of losing out geopolitically,

ideologically and politically at home,” said Alex Vatanka, senior fellow and director of the Iran program at The Middle East Institute.

“Geopolitically, the Iranian regime is now concerned with what Israeli presence in the Gulf will mean for Iran’s security. Ideologically, the axis of resistance is on the defensive. It is clear that the armed struggle option against Israel has not worked and perhaps it is time to try a different approach. Domestically this is an embarrassment for Iran in the eyes of Iranians.”

He said Iran now will have to come up with policy solutions and, more importantly, engage in introspection. “The question mark is still out there as to how much Israel and the Gulf will cooperate militarily and in intelligence, which will shape Iran’s actions going forward,” he said.

“Iran has made a giant mistake for the last 42 years by believing that it can come to terms with the Gulf states by going through Washington, and it is a false premise that’s not going to work. The axis of resistance is on the defensive, which puts pressure on Iran.”

According to Vatanka, should the Abraham Accords end up creating tangible new ways of cooperation involving Israel and the Gulf, it would make life harder for the ideological message that Iran has been promoting for the last 42 years. “This is an embarrassment for Iran and a failure on their part,” he said.



Members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) take part in a demonstration against American “crimes” in Tehran on January 3, 2020

following the killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Major General Qasem Soleimani in a US strike on his convoy at Baghdad international airport.
(AFP/File Photo)

“Iranian foreign policy has invited massive sanctions on the country and put the entire regime at risk. Iranians are going to come out on the streets and everything the Islamic Republic stands for will now be challenged, unlike any time you have seen it before. That is a real risk for the regime.”

Turkey too finds itself on the wrong side of the new Middle East order following the normalization of ties by Israel with the UAE and Bahrain, according to the other panel participant. Omar Taspinar, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seeking to create the perception of a Turkey that is strong in the region, in the eyes of the Muslim Brotherhood and hundreds of millions of Muslims.

He said the Abraham Accord confirms the sense of isolation that Turkey is feeling in the region, because Israel was an ally of Turkey not too long ago. “Now Turkey is increasingly perceived as an Islamist country,” Taspinar said. “This plays a role in the sense of anger, resentment and victimhood of Turkey. And Erdogan will use this victimhood to turn it to his advantage by stating that he is one of the few (remaining) allies of the Palestinian cause.”

Taspinar said Erdogan is playing the game along the lines of Turkey being one of the few countries that is able to challenge the dynamic in the region that is going towards the legitimization of Israel. “There is irony in this, because you can ask what has Turkey done for the Palestinians? This is more perception than reality, (but) Erdogan is in the business of creating perceptions,” he said.

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Taspinar believes “politically, Erdogan is determined to send the message that he is a supporter of the Palestinian cause as an additional step in his populist messages to the world and his domestic base.”

With President Donald Trump’s projected defeat in the US elections, Turkey is “the biggest loser,” Taspinar said, adding that a sense of panic had settled in Ankara today with regard to a Biden administration because it will not be interested in a reset without Turkey abiding by certain norms, including becoming a loyal NATO ally and figuring out a new path for relations in Syria.

“The US under (President Biden) will have a lot of leverage economically

against Erdogan, and the economy is where Erdogan is the most vulnerable because Turkey does not have oil nor natural gas. It is totally dependent (economically)," Taspinar said. "The Turkish economy and the lira are now in free fall, and without the economy doing well, Erdogan might lose the election."

However, Taspinar does not foresee Erdogan calibrating his "pro-Islamist" foreign policy because of the worsening economic situation in Turkey. "As the economy worsens, Turkey will look at opportunities in the Middle East to wave the flag of political Islam to distract attention from the mismanagement of the economy at home," he said.



A battleship of Turkish Naval Forces, which took part in the Blue Homeland 2019 Drill, passes Bosphorus in Istanbul, Turkey on March 09, 2019. (AFP/File Photo)

For his part, Vatanka said success stories will need to be attached to the UAE-Bahrain-Israel accord, and one of them is to bring the Palestinians into the conversation as soon as possible. "They cannot be left out in the cold," he said. "If the Palestinians accept the new realities on the ground, it will make life a lot more difficult for Turkey and Iran to use the Palestinian issue for their own political purpose."

He said it was vital for the sake of the UAE, Gulf stability and Israel neither to undo the accord any time soon, nor to become a staging ground for operations against Iran, as this may force the Iranians to retaliate. "If Iran chooses to go in the direction of trying to broaden the conversation in its foreign policy, that could be the beginning," Vatanka said.

“If Iran decides it will take the option of saving the nuclear deal and broadening the conversation, which could happen in six months, then the US will then be accepted by Iran as a player in the region. You have to have the Gulf states at the table; this is something that Washington and Tehran have to accept if for real sustainable de-escalation in the region.”

Vatanka said the election of Biden could have been the perfect opportunity for Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to shift in a new direction and blame the deteriorating relationship with the US on Trump. “Instead he has called the entire US government corrupt and criticized the elections. This is an indication that he is still thinking small and not willing to change the overall position of being a revolutionary militant Islamist state,” he said.

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Experts weigh up Biden’s Middle East policy options at Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate

In blast-hit Beirut, 'invisible' elderly women face destitution

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Thu, 2020-11-12 20:05

AMMAN: Thousands of elderly women in Beirut whose lives were upended by a huge blast in August now face destitution, as Lebanon buckles under financial crisis and a COVID-19 lockdown, charities said.

The United Nations (UN) and aid agencies said older women living alone made up almost one in 10 households in areas hit by the explosion, which wrecked swathes of Beirut, killed 200 people, injured thousands more and displaced 300,000.

"A mental health hotline responder noted a rise in calls from older people contemplating suicide," UN Women and others said in an analysis, calling for emergency aid in Beirut to better target potentially "invisible" elderly people.

"Because of higher rates of physical disabilities among older people, combined with increased inability to leave their homes, limited economic means and fears around COVID-19, older women are struggling to access assistance."

With almost 100,000 COVID-19 cases and some 700 deaths since February, Lebanon announced a new coronavirus lockdown this week to stem rising infections, with hospitals unable to find beds to admit critical cases, caretaker prime minister Hassan Diab said.

Before the August explosion, which officials blamed on unsafely stored ammonium nitrate, Lebanon was already grappling with worsening poverty, the scars of civil war three decades ago and a financial crisis rooted in corruption and mismanagement.

Some elderly people in Lebanon feel they are a burden on younger relatives, charities said, as there is no state pension in the Middle Eastern country and only retirees who were in formal employment receive financial support in old age.

Old women are often left in poverty. Lebanon has one of the world's lowest rates of women in the workforce, with less than one in three in paid employment, according to UN Women.

"Because they are women, they are less likely to have worked throughout their lives, which means they are less likely to have savings, they are less likely to have a pension," said Rachel Dore-Weeks, head of UN Women in Lebanon.

"Because of this, they are less likely to have the economic resources to react, respond and recover from the crisis."

Widows are often unable to support themselves financially so they rely on their children, who then count on their children to do the same for them in old age, said Maya Ibrahimchah, founder of Beit el Baraka, a non-profit that

supports elderly people.

"We don't want parents to always be a burden on their kids," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"These three post-war generations are not living. They are surviving in order to take care of the previous generations."

Beit el Baraka was one of the leaders of Beirut's large community-led effort after the blast to help rebuild homes, provide aid, medication and psychological support.

One of its main goals is to help elderly people with rent and utility payments so that they are not forced out of their homes into cheaper accommodation or on to the streets.

"It's very difficult at 70 to leave your whole life, your friends and neighbors behind, and go rent a small room in a poor area where you don't know anyone," Ibrahimchah said.

"(We) need to make sure that they can stay in their homes and be taken care of until this economic crisis is over."

Plans to expand social protection schemes to tackle poverty, including a universal state pension, were put on hold after the government resigned in the wake of the August blast, said Assem Abi Ali of the social affairs ministry.

"One of its main components addresses the issue of caring for the elderly through a pension scheme ... in order to protect them from destitution, hunger and homelessness," said Abi Ali who supervises its crisis response plan, which began in 2015.

Working with humanitarian groups, the ministry helped deliver food aid, wheelchairs and crutches to elderly and disabled people after the blast, Abi Ali said.

But Dore-Weeks said more needed to be done to provide elderly women, disproportionately living in poverty and alone, with medical and emotional support during the pandemic.

"There is a huge need for tailored psychosocial support for these communities and that is a real challenge in the context of COVID-19 when so many face-to-face interactions are deemed unsafe," she said.



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How the port explosion rubbed raw Beirut's psychological scars
A Syrian refugee whose fridge was stolen from his home in Homs finds it in Beirut

[UK removes quarantine restrictions from 3 Gulf states](#)

Thu, 2020-11-12 22:39

LONDON: The UK government has taken three Gulf countries off its mandatory quarantine list, which instructs arrivals to self-isolate for two weeks to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

Travelers from the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar will no longer have to adhere to the quarantine regulations.

Paul Charles, CEO of PC Agency travel consultants, welcomed the move to ease travel to and from the Arab states, calling it "a highly significant decision

and a major boost to opening up long-haul travel from the UK again.”

He added: “Unlocking Gulf hubs such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar enables UK travelers to reach most corners of the world to the east and south ... These moves show that the government is serious about connecting the UK to the world again, despite the pandemic.”



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As some nations open, UK to quarantine arrivals for 2 weeksUK will ditch travel quarantine for 75 countries, Daily Telegraph says