

Sudan deal plunges migrants in Israel into new uncertainty

Author:

Sun, 2020-11-01 00:45

TEL AVIV: Usumain Baraka speaks impeccable Hebrew, considers Israelis among his best friends and can quote passages from the Old Testament. But as a Sudanese asylum seeker, Baraka has no legal status in Israel and lives a precarious life tethered to the whims of the Israeli government.

Now, after Israel and Sudan agreed to normalize ties, Baraka is among 6,000 Sudanese in Israel once again fearing for their fate.

Israel already has indicated it will seek to settle the migrant issue in upcoming talks with Sudan, whipping up trepidation in the community that Israel might forcibly return them to Sudan, a place they say they fled because of conflict or persecution.

"If I return tomorrow or the day after when there is the official peace they are talking about, something awaits me there, and that's danger," said Baraka, 25, who fled Janjaweed militia attacks on his village in Darfur at the age of nine.

Israel and Sudan announced earlier this month they would normalize ties, making Sudan the third Arab country to do so in as many months.

The announcement brought satisfaction to Israelis. But after years of failed Israeli attempts to remove the migrants, it has renewed fears among the Sudanese who have long had an insecure existence in their adopted home.

African migrants, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, began arriving in Israel in 2005 through its porous border with Egypt after Egyptian forces violently quashed a refugee demonstration and word spread of safety and job opportunities in Israel. Tens of thousands crossed the desert border in often dangerous journeys.

Israel initially turned a blind eye to their influx and many took up menial jobs in hotels and restaurants. But as their numbers swelled, there was a backlash, with growing calls to expel the new arrivals.

Israel considers the vast majority of the migrants to be job seekers and says it has no legal obligation to keep them. The Africans say they are asylum seekers who fled for their lives and face renewed danger if they return. Many come from Darfur and other conflict-ridden regions.

Sudan's former leader, Omar Bashir, has been charged with genocide for a campaign of mass killings that took place in Darfur under his watch. The area still experiences tribal clashes and rebel violence.

Under international law, Israel cannot forcibly send migrants back to a country where their life or liberty may be at risk. Critics accuse the government instead of trying to coerce them into leaving.

Over the years, Israel has detained thousands of migrants in remote desert prisons, left thousands of asylum requests open and offered cash payments to those who agreed to move to third African countries.

It also has built a barrier along the border with Egypt that stopped the influx and reached a deal with the UN to resettle thousands of migrants in Western countries while allowing thousands of others to remain in Israel –

though the deal was quickly scrapped under pressure from anti-migrant activists and hard-line legislators.

The migrants' presence has long divided the country. Their supporters say Israel, a country founded upon the ashes of the Holocaust and built up by Jewish refugees, should welcome those seeking refuge. Opponents claim the migrants have brought crime to the low-income south Tel Aviv neighborhoods where they have settled. Some Israeli politicians have labeled them infiltrators, with one calling them "a cancer" threatening the country's Jewish character.

"I believe they are economic migrants and they act as if they own the place," said Sheffi Paz, a prominent anti-migrant activist.

Publicly, Israeli leaders have been guarded about their plans. On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israeli and Sudanese delegations would soon meet to "discuss cooperation in many fields, including in the field of migration." A spokeswoman for Israel's Interior Ministry declined to comment.

A top Sudanese military official with direct knowledge of the early contacts with Israel said the matter of returning the migrants has not yet been discussed. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter in public.

Israel deported about 1,000 migrants back to South Sudan in 2012 after an Israeli court determined they were no longer at risk in their home country, which had just gained independence. But activists say some died there from disease and others fled renewed conflict.

Israel has acknowledged in recent court proceedings that the situation in Sudan remains volatile, and advocacy groups that work with the migrants say that deporting them will come up against stiff legal challenges.

"If Israel will dare to deport Sudanese with open asylum claims it will be a grave violation of the most fundamental principle of the refugee convention," said Sigal Rozen, public policy director at the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants.

She said Israeli leaders may nonetheless be raising the issue to prompt some Sudanese to leave voluntarily.

Migrants have already been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, their jobs in restaurants and hotels threatened by repeated lockdowns. Without proper status in Israel, they are not entitled to claim unemployment insurance. Rozen said some sympathetic employers have kept on migrant workers just to give them a lifeline.

In the south Tel Aviv neighborhood where many migrants live, a pedestrian street typically lively with shops and restaurants was dreary on a recent day. Grey shutters sealed the entrances to many businesses and some mask-wearing migrants lingered on stoops.

Baraka fled Darfur after his father was killed in front of him. He settled in a displacement camp along the border with Chad before departing on a precarious journey north, through Libya and Egypt, to be smuggled through the desert into Israel, where he has lived for more than a decade.

He submitted an asylum request to Israel in 2013 and it remains open. While he welcomes any deal that stabilizes relations between Sudan and Israel, he doesn't believe that opens the door for his return.

"I do believe in what they're talking about now, normalization between Sudan and Israel," Baraka said. "I support it, but we need to know who it's being

done with, when to do it and how to do it.”



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KSR relief launches new medical campaign in Sudan
Sudanese in Israel fear being returned after normalization

[Baghdad square reopens a year after mass protest closure](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-11-01 00:41

BAGHDAD: Iraqi authorities reopened Baghdad's Tahrir Square on Saturday, symbolically ending more than a year of demonstrations at the site, a focal point for the country's anti-government protest movement.

They also reopened the nearby Jumhuriyah bridge, which leads toward the heavily fortified Green Zone housing government buildings, parliament and foreign embassies. A hotspot of clashes during the protests, the bridge across the Tigris River witnessed fierce clashes between protesters and government forces last year as protesters tried to cross it. It has been

sealed off to traffic since.

The reopening of the bridge and removal of tents in Tahrir Square appeared to put a formal end to a mass movement that had for a brief moment given many Iraqis hope for the future.

"The opening of Al-Jumhuriyah bridge and the removal of the tents from Tahrir Square was done in coordination with the protesters and there was no tension whatsoever," said Maj. Gen. Qais Al-Mohammadawi, the head of Baghdad Operations Command.

Protester tents have been dismantled at the Tahrir roundabout, now again circled by cars, and the towering concrete walls used to close off the Al-Jumhuriyah bridge across the Tigris River have been removed.

Security forces used bulldozers to help clear some of the protesters' tents in Tahrir Square. A few days before, thousands had rallied there to mark the anniversary of the mass demonstrations that swept the country against corruption by Iraq's entrenched political parties and its sectarian system.

FASTFACT

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Clashes with security forces during the revolt left around 600 people dead and 30,000 wounded, the vast majority demonstrators.

"The reopening of these places does not mean the revolt is over," said Kamal Jabar, one of the figures of the movement dubbed the "October Revolution."

"The protesters have lost a battle, but the movement endures and is now working to set up political organizations," he told AFP.

The movement had called for jobs, basic services, a total overhaul of the ruling class and an end to corruption.

But it lost momentum and then ground to a halt in the spring due to an outbreak of tensions between arch-foes the US and Iran on Iraqi soil and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The protests helped usher in Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi in May, but he has yet to deliver on any major reforms.

Lockdown measures imposed to stem the virus and the fall in oil prices precipitated Iraq's tumble into its worst economic downturn and doubled the country's poverty rate to 40 percent.

Amid the crisis, public pressure mounted to reopen Tahrir Square and Al-Jumhuriyah bridge to ease traffic in Baghdad – a city of 10 million inhabitants – and to revive trade in the center of the Arab world's second most populated capital.

Despite reaching unprecedented numbers in late 2019 and successfully mounting pressure on elites, the anti-government protests have been largely dormant in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Activists also blamed the drop in numbers on a violent crackdown by Iraqi security forces and militia groups,

as well as kidnappings and targeted assassinations.



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Gas pipeline blast in southern Iraq kills 2, injures 51, police say Iraqi forces use water cannon, tear gas against protesters in Baghdad

[Turkey picks up the pieces after devastating quake](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-10-31 23:20

ANKARA: Canan Gullu was having coffee with her friends on her balcony when the quake struck. The head of the Ankara-based Women Associations of Turkey, she had decided to spend the weekend in her summer house in the coastal town of Seferihisar after sleepless nights spent helping victims of domestic violence in the capital.

The teacups fell on the ground, and they hid under a table until they feel safer.

"I felt the building shaking, then the house began moving toward the house next door. It was as if the ground was moving back and forth under our feet. We could barely stand," Gullu told Arab News.

It was followed by a mini-tsunami that hit the district where she was living.

"I am now focusing on providing essential goods for the women living on the streets or whose buildings collapsed. It is the other face of poverty in Turkey," Gullu said.

The powerful quake that hit Turkey's western province of Izmir on Oct. 30 revealed the weak infrastructure of the country's building stock. Although the local residents are used to living with frequent tremors, the 7.0 magnitude quake on Friday evening was the biggest they had experienced; it was as powerful as the 1999 earthquake near Istanbul when more than 17,000 people died.

The search and rescue operations continued on Saturday, with touching footages showing a mother and her three children as well as a cat and a dog being rescued 18 hours after being trapped under the debris of their building.

Turkish survivors continue to stay outside in the tents provided by the municipality for fear of aftershocks. Some hotel and restaurant owners offered free rooms and free dinners to the traumatized people.

To prevent traffic blocking rescue efforts, the authorities have banned vehicles entering the city center.

Friday's quake killed more than 30 people in Turkey and the neighbouring Greek islands, although that figure was expected to rise. Almost 900 people were injured, with 243 under treatment and eight in intensive care, officials said.

Despite their diplomatic row over energy drilling operations in the waters of the eastern Mediterranean, Turkish and Greek officials exchanged solidarity messages on Twitter.

"Whatever our differences, these are times when our people need to stand together," Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweeted.

Many people were still waiting for news of relatives trapped under the debris.

Izmir is crossed by 17 different fault lines and has been prone to frequent tremors in the past. The quake resilience of the buildings in the city and unplanned urbanization have come under the spotlight, sparking criticism of the authorities.

The Turkish government issued a controversial zoning amnesty ahead of the general elections of 2018, resulting in 10 million illegally constructed buildings throughout the country.

These were eligible for legitimate deeds, with disastrous consequences during the quakes. Izmir tops the list for the number of illegal buildings that were “forgiven” by a government move to garner more votes.

Several buildings that benefited from that amnesty have collapsed over the years, killing dozens of people. Estimates say that one-fifth of the buildings in Istanbul could be completely destroyed in a quake with a magnitude of 7 or above.

In a past interview, Turkey’s famous contractor Ali Agaoglu, who was proud of selling massive residences to Arab clients, confessed that his company used sand from the Marmara Sea during their construction work. “If there is an earthquake in Istanbul, (the number of the dead and collapsed buildings will be so high that) the army won’t even be able to enter the city,” he said.

Turkey’s earthquake tax was also the subject of intense debate earlier this year with the quakes in eastern provinces of Elazig and Malatya, after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: “We spent it where it was meant to be spent. And after this, we do not have time to provide accountability for matters like this.”

Special taxes were levied in Turkey after the 1999 earthquake and were later made permanent. However, there is widespread skepticism about whether these taxes were spent on quake resilience or whether they only helped the state budget at that time.





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Death toll reaches 37 in quake that hit Turkey, Greek island 22 dead, buildings collapse as major quake hits Turkey, Greece

[British-Iranian national Zaghari-Ratcliffe details first prison interrogation](#)

Sat, 2020-10-31 19:09

LONDON: Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian dual national imprisoned in Iran on contested charges of espionage, has given an account of her first interrogation in 2016.

She said she was threatened with her daughter being taken away, and her interrogators claimed her husband was a spy and gave her false information regarding her release.

Her account of her first 40 days in custody appears in "White Torture," a recently published book of interviews with women imprisoned in Iran on political charges compiled by Narges Mohammadi, who is in prison for her human rights work.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe told Mohammadi that she spent the first 40 days in total isolation. In her early imprisonment, Zaghari-Ratcliffe said she endured days without sleep, panic attacks, fainting, and regular attempts by her interrogators to force a confession of espionage.

READ MORE: [British FM: Zaghari-Ratcliffe imprisonment will 'sabotage' UK-Iran ties](#)

She told the author that the ordeal was so distressing that she came to "doubt herself" and question whether the accusations were real.

"They tried to induce me to say something that didn't exist. They said they had top-secret evidence that I worked for the (British) parliament and against Iran," she said.

"I was sure that was not the case, but they repeated it so much that I doubted myself when I returned to the cell. I spent long hours in my cell wondering if the projects I had worked on had anything to do with Iran. Then I told myself that I was 100% sure that my projects had nothing to do with Iran, but after each interrogation I would review these cases over and over again," she added.

"The interrogators threatened to send Gabriella (her daughter) to London if I did not cooperate. They kept telling me that I had lost my job and that if interrogation took too long my husband would leave me. They asked me to tell them about my friends and their work projects. I had not really slept for three weeks. I had not seen my child and I was under a lot of pressure."

After her initial arrest and interrogation, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was sent to the notorious Ervin Prison.

She said after she was transferred there, she was allowed to meet her family, but she hardly recognized her daughter.

During the visitations, she said she struggled when her daughter asked her to go to her parents' house.

"Every time she (Gabriella) cried goodbye I would break down," she said. "The interrogators were present in the meeting room. When saying goodbye, I wanted to go ahead and tie her shoes for her, but they wouldn't let me and I had to leave her."

Zaghari-Ratcliffe is set to return to court on Monday in Tehran. If she is returned to prison, as she expects, she will once again be separated from her

husband and daughter.



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UK summons Iran envoy as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe faces return to jailUK-Iranian 'hostage' Zaghari-Ratcliffe due back in Tehran jail

[Iran closes mosques, schools in deadly 'third wave' of coronavirus](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2020-10-31 11:58

JEDDAH:: Mosques, schools, universities, beauty salons, cafes, gyms, museums, theaters and swimming pools in 25 of Iran's 31 provinces were ordered to close for 10 days from next Wednesday.

In Tehran, the closure of beauty salons, teahouses, cinemas, libraries and fitness clubs has been extended for a week.

Police will make unannounced visits to other high-risk businesses, and any found to be breaking health rules will be shut down. Weddings, funeral gatherings and conferences in the capital have been banned.

Authorities have blamed a sharp increase in coronavirus cases on people failing to follow restrictions, and President Hassan Rouhani said an operations headquarters would be set up to ensure compliance.

Iran was slow to respond to the pandemic when the first cases emerged there in February, and is now the worst-affected country in the Middle East. It recorded several recent daily fatality and infection highs, with figures on the rise since September.

Health Ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said on Saturday there had been 7,820 new cases in the previous 24 hours, taking the total to 612,772, and the death toll rose by 386 to 34,864.

Most analysts believe the real figures are higher. "The disease's spread ... especially in the city of Tehran is worse than what the government has revealed so far," Etemad daily wrote on Saturday.

Calls are growing for a full national lockdown, which Rouhani has resisted because the Iranian economy, already collapsing under US sanctions, could not cope.

One leading doctor said daily fatalities could reach 900 unless tougher measures were taken.

"The country, or high-risk cities, must be completely quarantined for two to three weeks," said Alireza Naji, head of the virology department at Iran's top respiratory disease hospital, Masih Daneshvari.

In Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, the virus remained largely under control. Health chiefs reported 403 new cases on Saturday, taking the total to 347,282, and the death toll rose by 19 to 5,402. Worldwide the virus has infected more than 46 million people and killed nearly 1.2 million.

Amid fears of a "second wave" of infection sweeping Europe, Austria's government declared a second mass shutdown and a curfew from this week until the end of November, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed a new lockdown in England until Dec. 2.



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Iranian man arrested over deaths of family in English Channel
Virus sets Iran record again – this time infections