

Finance minister says Iraq's leaders willing to make reforms

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BAGHDAD: Iraq's finance minister said Thursday there is growing political will to undertake drastic reforms needed for the country to tackle a daunting liquidity crisis, which has pushed Iraq to the brink of collapse.

"There is more will now than there was five months ago," Finance Minister Ali Allawi told The Associated Press. "Now, I think there is recognition that unless oil prices go up miraculously, this is something we have to cope with and manage."

Low oil prices have slashed state coffers in the crude-exporting country by nearly half, and over-reliance on oil has limited the government's ability to seek out other income. A widening month-to-month deficit has cast uncertainty over how future payments will be made for public wages, external debts and essential imports of food and medicine.

Iraq's unsustainable economy, laid bare by fiscal pressures spurred by spiraling oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic, is a long-standing problem that has flummoxed reformists for over a decade.

This week, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government issued a much-anticipated 95-page "white paper" for economic reform that, if implemented, would prompt a drastic overhaul of the entire system within three to five years.

"It is a paper designed to create a strategic and policy framework for a new Iraqi economy," said Allawi. "In the end of this period of change and reform ... we are supposed to have a restructured and more dynamic economy, that is the point of it."

The absence of support from major political elites has undermined similar efforts in the past. Al-Kadhimi's government still depends on an endorsement by Parliament for the vision to gain steam.

"There is less denial, before it was all denial," said Allawi.

With oil prices not expected to rebound in the near-term, only reforms will see Iraq avoid an economic catastrophe, top officials in al-Kadhimi's government, including Allawi, have repeatedly said. The future of the project faces a major test: Parliament endorsement in the form of a binding resolution or legislation.

Later, aspects of the plan outlined in the paper will be incorporated into the 2021 budget, said Allawi, something that will also require a parliament vote. Government subsidies in the electricity and oil sectors will face particular scrutiny.

In September, Iraq made \$3.16 billion in oil exports, which accounts for 90% of state revenue – less than half of the \$7 billion needed to pay for salaries, pensions, imports and debts. September salaries were delayed and the payment of October wages depends largely on the government borrowing

internally. A previous bill allowing for \$12 billion in internal borrowing has been used up; a new one, asking for \$35 billion, faces a parliament vote. "I hope parliament will approve it," said Allawi of the bill. "If it doesn't, we have potential for other alternatives, but it will be more difficult." Iraq's dollar reserves stand at \$53 billion.



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[Atomic energy watchdog seeks details on secret Iranian nuclear site](#)

Thu, 2020-10-15 22:17

CHICAGO: Officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have asked the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) to provide details of their claims that Iran maintains a secret nuclear site hidden from the world

as a UN-mandated nuclear arms embargo on Iran expires this week.

Lifting the UN arms embargo against Iran will allow Tehran to purchase and sell military arms with neighboring countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen, a panel of experts hosted by the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW) said Thursday. They said Iran will be able to purchase weapons from China and Russia, including hi-tech fighter jets, sophisticated missiles and other weapons, and they agreed that it would allow Iran to pursue its nuclear agenda.

Iranian Parliament-in-Exile member [Ali Safavi told the Arab News-sponsored Detroit radio program "The Ray Hanania Show" on Wednesday that the NCRI has evidence that Iran has been operating a secret nuclear facility.](#) During the radio interview, Safavi said the NCRI will disclose the information publicly at a press conference that is scheduled for Friday.

Iran's plans for building a nuclear weapon have been checked by a UN-mandated embargo that was imposed in July 2007 under the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA expires on Oct. 18. US President Donald Trump said he will impose an embargo on Tehran, but experts said they expect European countries to sell weapons and equipment to Iran once the UN embargo expires.

Those weapons could include "armored combat vehicles, large-caliber artillery, combat aircraft and attack helicopters, warships and more significantly cruise missiles and launchers," said panel host Hussein Ibish, AGSIW resident scholar.

"All of this has become possible precisely because the US effort to use the JCPOA grievance mechanism didn't work and nobody wanted to go along with the extension," he added.

Thursday's discussion titled "After the Embargo: Iran's Weapons Agenda and its Regional Impact" also included AGSIW Senior Fellow Ali Alfoneh, AGSIW Non-Resident Fellow David Des Roches, and National Defense University Associate Professor Kirsten Fontenrose.

The military and arms experts agreed the embargo's ending will not fuel an arms build-up by Iran's non-state clients, like Hezbollah, but said they expect an increase in Iranian weapons purchases and sales with countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen, impacting regional security concerns.

"Hezbollah would not be following UN Security Resolutions in any chance," said Ali Alfoneh. "The biggest impact would not be on the non-state clients of Iran like Hezbollah."

The lifting of the embargo would open the door to regional governments like Iraq and Syria possibly purchasing weapons from Iran to bolster their arsenals.

"The Iranians have smuggled many embargoed items to their affiliates in the region. But with the embargo being lifted, it makes that volume and that flow much more significant," Fontenrose said.

“The failure of the JCPOA was a huge shock to the political leadership in Iran,” Alfoneh said.

“The future is very insecure. Even if that administration changes, I am not entirely convinced that presidential candidate Joe Biden would go back to a JCPOA as it was before. It is very likely there will be some changes made to the JCPOA.”

Fontenrose anticipates that regardless of who wins the upcoming US election, she can foresee scenarios in which Israel would strike at Iran’s nuclear facilities with support from their Emirati partners, especially if Israel believes that the US is “too soft” on Iran.

“You are going to have hardliners in Tehran who slow-roll a nuclear deal and either have no deal with the Trump administration ... or you will have Iran at the table but agreeing to very little with the Biden administration,” Fontenrose said.

“What you see is Israel saying we need to do something about this nuclear program if Iran continues to escalate it. If it stays in place it is a different story. But if Iran continues to ramp up its withdrawal from the JCPOA or ramp up its production, I can see Israel undertaking strikes again against their facilities. And at this point, will we see the UAE involved in the planning, not execution, of those strikes?”



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Egyptian army begins Radaa 2020 military drills

Author:

Thu, 2020-10-15 22:10

CAIRO: Radaa-2020 (Deterrence-2020 drills), carried out by units from the Egyptian Central Military Region with the participation of the branches of the Egyptian Armed Forces, is underway.

The drills will continue for several days as part of the annual plan for combat training of the Egyptian Armed Forces' formations and units, in conjunction with the celebrations of the country and the armed forces of the 47th anniversary of the October war.

The drills include training in the preparation and organization of battle, moving and conquering and then pushing the main force to attack the front border of the hostile defenses, and completing the attack to achieve the planned tasks using the MILES simulation.

Mohamed Farid Hegazy, chief of staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces, addressed a number of commanders and officers participating in the project about the way to carry out the tasks assigned to them.

He imposed a number of emergency tactical situations to ensure their ability to take the right decision to face sharp and rapid changes during the course of the battle.

The Egyptian and Russian navies are conducting joint exercises in the Black Sea until the end of this year.

During the exercises, the warships of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Navy and the Egyptian Navy, with the support of aircraft, will train to defend sea lanes against various threats.

Troops will be deployed to organize communications and resupply at sea, and participants in the exercises will conduct searches for suspicious ships.

Commander of the Egyptian Air Force Mohamed Abbas Helmy said on Tuesday that the Egyptian Army had air forces capable of reaching the farthest range to confront threats to Egypt's national security.

Helmy confirmed that all major branches, including the air force, had witnessed an unprecedented boom in weapons systems, especially in recent years.

He said that events in neighboring countries and the targeting of terrorist organizations, in addition to regional developments, was a push to modernize

the armament system within the air force.

The choice of modern air weapons was based on the nature of the tasks required, and challenges and potential threats against Egyptian national security, with the aim of protecting the capabilities and wealth of the Egyptian state, and if there was a need to strike terrorist elements.



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Egyptian Air Force commander hails modernization efforts
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[Israeli parliament backs UAE, Bahrain normalization deals](#)

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JERUSALEM: Israel's parliament voted Thursday in favor of the normalization of ties with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain after a marathon debate with over 100 speeches lasting more than eight hours. A total of 80 lawmakers voted to approve the US-brokered agreements, with 13 against, members of Israel's United Arab List party. "This historic agreement... will bring us closer to other countries in the region to sign other peace agreements," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said. Netanyahu said Israel had contact recently with another country in the region for the first time, but did not reveal its name. The UAE in August became the first Arab nation to establish relations with Israel since Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, followed after by Bahrain. The US-brokered deals were formalized at the White House on September 15. The Gulf agreements were condemned by the Palestinians as a "betrayal," and broke with years of Arab League policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The US administration is trying to broker other deals between the Jewish state and other Arab nations.





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[International delegation draws attention to Turkey's press freedom record](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-10-15 21:21

ANKARA: Restrictions on Turkey's press freedom have been put in the spotlight by a four-day visit to Turkey by a group of 11 international press freedom, journalism and human rights groups.

Based on its meetings with Turkish journalists, civil society members, parliamentarians, judiciary members and diplomatic missions, the delegation released its initial findings on Oct. 14, with a special emphasis on the increasing state control over the media, lack of independence of regulatory bodies and the restrictions of the new social media law on the freedom of expression.

The persistent investigations and imprisonment of independent journalists and the attacks that compromise the safety of media representatives were also voiced by the mission as a source of concern.

The delegation was convened by the International Press Institute (IPI) and involved representatives from Article 19, the Association of European Journalists (AEJ), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBC Transeuropa), PEN International, Reporters without Borders (RSF) and the South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO).

Turkey is ranked 154th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index that assesses the level of freedom available to journalists.

In September, at least 64 journalists appeared in Turkish courts for 38 press trials.

According to the data of Press In Arrest, an independent database about journalists' trials, Turkish journalists faced a 7 counts of aggravated life sentence, and prison sentences of up to a total of 970 years and 10 months in September. Journalists mainly faced charges of terrorism and espionage, and of insulting state officials.

The government excluded journalists from an early release program to ease overcrowding in prisons during the pandemic, even though some of them faced grave health risks.

"We can clearly conclude that the censorship and press freedom crisis in Turkey is worsening," Scott Griffen, deputy director at IPI, told Arab News.

"On the one hand, journalists are still being jailed for doing their job and the justice system is being instrumentalized to crack down on critics. We don't see any political will from the authorities to change this. But on the other hand, new issues are emerging: State capture of the media, digital censorship and new attacks on judicial independence," he added.

Griffen underlined that after the mainstream media were captured by the state, social media and online platforms became havens of free expression beyond the government's censorship tools.

The new social media law that came into force on Oct. 1, obliges online platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook with more than a million users to send reports to Turkey's state-controlled Information and Communication Technologies Authority about requests to censor or block access

to online content.

The law sparked concern among rights groups about its potential use to censor outspoken journalists in the country who use online platforms as a small window through which they try to continue their journalism.

With the new law, internet hosts or search engines have immediately to execute access blocking decisions of the authorities, while the social media companies are required to appoint a representative in Turkey and store users' data on local servers, a move that gives the government more chance to silence fierce criticism and block access to websites such as Twitter that Turkish people use for following news that is not controlled by the government.

"Turkey's social media law threatens to usher in a new era of digital censorship. We also see the increasing use of regulatory bodies, such as the Radio and Television High Council (RTUK), which are supposed to be independent but are instead instrumentalized by the state, to punish critical broadcast and online media in particular," Griffen said.

The international delegation also drew attention to the rising pressure on the judiciary, especially on the Turkish Constitutional Court, which is the last remaining bastion for defending press freedom on the basis of the constitution.

The top court has been subject to harsh criticism by the government officials who have called for a reorganization of the institution to fit into the executive presidential system that will inevitably curb its independent status.

According to Griffen, if the court is lost to pressure, it will be a huge blow to democracy and the rule of law in Turkey.

The international mission also met with the Human Rights Department of the Ministry of Justice during their visit to Ankara.

However, Griffen said, the mission members did not see any political will from the governmental authorities to reverse the damage that the press freedom crackdown has caused to democracy in Turkey.

"We do not yet see the will to end the relentless attacks on individual journalists and their families or to end political influence over the judiciary and bring Turkey back to the club of countries that respect the rule of law," he added.

An Istanbul court on Oct. 7 declared exiled dissident journalist Can Dunder, the former editor of Cumhuriyet newspaper, a "fugitive" and ruled for the seizure of his assets. Dunder fled to Germany almost four years ago. He was charged with supporting a terrorist group.



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Turkey 'using virus curbs to target media' Broadcasting bans on critical Turkish outlets rise amid free press concerns