

# Iraq reforms stymied by wave of attacks blamed on pro-Iran groups

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-10 01:23

BAGHDAD: War-scarred Iraq hopes to launch reforms and revive its battered economy, but the drive is being derailed by a wave of violence blamed largely on shadowy pro-Iranian groups.

Since Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi took office in May, he has promised to rein in rogue militias, fight corruption and roll out long-awaited restructuring after years of war and insurgency.

But the closer his government gets to its stated aims, the more armed actors with suspected links to Washington's arch enemy Tehran are lashing out, top Iraqi officials and analysts told AFP.

"Every time these groups see us getting close to their military or economic interests, they either launch rockets or propaganda campaigns to distract us," said one senior government official.

Violence was already rising before Kadhimi traveled to Washington last month to meet US President Donald Trump, who was Wednesday expected to announce further troop withdrawals from Iraq. But the situation has only destabilized further.

Late Tuesday, a bomb hit a supply convoy heading to an Iraqi base where US troops are deployed, killing one member of the Iraqi security forces.

On Sept. 3, an attack targeted the Baghdad headquarters of British-American security company G4S. One intelligence official told AFP a drone had dropped an explosive charge on the building.

No faction claimed responsibility, but Tehran-backed groups had accused G4S of complicity in January's US drone strike that killed Iran's top general Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad.

Days earlier, a UN worker was wounded when an improvised explosive device detonated underneath an aid convoy in the northern city of Mosul.

A faction identifying itself as part of the "Islamic resistance" – a catch-all phrase for pro-Iran factions – took responsibility, accusing the UN of using its convoys to transport American spies.

"Your vehicles will burn in the streets of Iraq," it threatened online.

A half-dozen previously unheard-of such factions have made similar threats in recent months under the "Islamic resistance" banner, but officials say they are a smokescreen.

"Five groups, including Kataeb Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl Al-Haq and others, are behind the recent instability across the country," an Iraqi intelligence officer said.

These hard-line groups are members of Iraq's Hashed Al-Shaabi, a state-sponsored network dominated by factions close to Iran and wary of the US.

US officials have made similar accusations, naming Kataeb Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl Al-Haq as the real perpetrators of rocket attacks on American installations in Iraq.

The same groups had accused Kadhemi of plotting against Soleimani when the former was Iraq's top intelligence official and were furious when he rose to become premier.

They have understood Kadhemi's pledges to reign in armed groups as an attempt to clip their wings, officials and experts have told AFP.

Beyond escalating rocket attacks, the groups have also ramped up pressure through unconventional media outlets.

Anonymous channels on messaging application Telegram publish taunting warnings of attacks on military convoys well before they happen, deepening a sense of impunity.

The same forums have targeted Iraqi television channels critical of Iran.

Dijla TV was torched last week after the Telegram channels turned on them, and a new wave of threats have targeted Sunni-owned UTV.

The campaign began after the US government seized the website domains of Al-Etejah, an Iraqi television station linked to Kataeb Hezbollah.

The government is not looking for a direct confrontation with these groups, said Kadhemi's spokesman Ahmad Mulla.

"Instead, we are looking to dry up their funding resources by targeting border crossings," used for lucrative smuggling from Iran, Mulla told AFP.

Officials knew this could be dangerous. When the PM launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign on Iraq's porous borders, they braced for the worst.

"They will blackmail officials, threaten their families, mobilize the tribes and maybe even commit assassinations," one senior official told AFP in July.

Indeed, two anti-government activists were gunned down weeks later in the southern port city of Basra, and tribal violence erupted north of Baghdad.

"We are constantly putting out fires, so we can't properly focus on the bigger strategy," another Iraqi official said, about Baghdad's efforts to reform the state and revitalize an economy hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and low oil prices.

A third official told AFP that Iraq's Finance Minister Ali Allawi missed his Aug. 24 deadline to submit an economic reform plan to parliament because of the recent tumult.

Last week, Kadhemi set up an anti-corruption council, authorizing the elite troops of the Counter-Terrorism Service to arrest officials usually considered too senior to touch.

His forces also carried out search operations in Basra and Baghdad to seize unlicensed arms, but few have turned up.

Iraqi security expert Fadel Abou Raghif said the situation was "dangerous."

"Ultimately, Kadhemi should open a real dialogue with the spiritual leaders of these groups to avoid a clash."



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After highest virus increase yet, Iraq warns it may 'lose control' UK envoy to Iraq threatened by pro-Iran militias

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# Morocco extends health emergency as virus cases spike

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-10 01:03

RABAT: Morocco's government on Wednesday extended a medical state of emergency until next month in the face of a sharp rise in coronavirus cases.

"Today, the cabinet approved a project for a decree extending until October 10 the duration of the medical state of emergency to combat Covid-19," Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El-Othmani tweeted.

Morocco's economic capital of Casablanca, with 3.3 million residents, has been under lockdown since Monday, including a nighttime curfew and closure of schools.

Emergency measures were first put in place in March.

Casablanca, along with Marrakesh, had already been subject to a series of restrictions three weeks ago, including beach closures and shortened business hours.

All exits to major cities in the North African country have been closed, with travel only allowed with "exceptional authorization" issued by local authorities.

"We risk being submerged by the virus," Health Minister Khalid Ait Taleb said Sunday. "So drastic measures are in order, otherwise the situation risks spinning out of control in coming days."

With more than 1,000 confirmed cases a day since the start of August, Moroccan media have been critical of the handling of the health crisis.

The authorities blame the spread of Covid-19 in Morocco on people's failure to adhere to health protocols.

The country of 35 million inhabitants has recorded more than 1,400 deaths from coronavirus and over 75,721 confirmed cases.





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Morocco sees travel mayhem after snap movement restrictions Morocco shuts down major cities after spike in coronavirus cases

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## [Syria battles forest fires for seventh day straight](#)

Author:

AFP

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Wed, 2020-09-09 16:49

DAMASCUS: Syrian firefighters and army helicopters Wednesday battled forest fires for a seventh consecutive day in government-held areas of the war-torn country, state media said.

Damascus ally Iran sent in a firefighting plane Wednesday carrying 40 tons of water to help fight the fires in the hilly woodlands of Latakia and Hama provinces, in northwestern and central Syria respectively, state news agency SANA said.

State media has published repeated images of billowing smoke above tree tops

and charred vegetation.

“Numerous fires have been put out, others brought under control, but the fires continue to rage in some areas” of Latakia, forestry official Hassan Fares told AFP.

The agriculture ministry said steep terrain was an obstacle to fire trucks being able to reach the fire hit areas quickly.

There was no immediate data for how large an area had been affected overall. But Hama governor Mohammed Al-Hazouri said the blaze had ravaged eight square kilometers (three square miles) of agricultural land in his province alone. Summer fires, sometimes sparked by accident and generally not linked to the war, are common in Syria, but residents have said this year’s are worse than usual.

Syria’s war has killed more than 380,000 people, displaced millions from their homes, and decimated the country’s economy.











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UN detects virus cases in Syrian refugee camp in Jordan  
Presumed Israeli strikes kill 16 pro-Iran fighters in Syria

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## [Lebanon president requests contact with US Embassy over sanctions on ex-ministers](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-09 23:57

BEIRUT: Lebanon's President Michel Aoun has asked his interim foreign minister to contact the US embassy about the imposition of sanctions on two of the country's former ministers, the presidency media office said on Wednesday.

Aoun also requested contact be made with the Lebanese embassy in Washington "in order to understand the circumstances" behind the decision to place the



politicians, allied with the Shiite Muslim group Hezbollah, on its sanctions list.

The US Treasury on Tuesday announced it was imposing sanctions on former finance minister and top Amal official Ali Hassan Khalil and former public works and transportation minister Youssef Fenianos, a senior member of the Christian Marada Movement.

The treasury department said they "provided material support to Hezbollah and engaged in corruption." The move was Washington's strongest warning against Hezbollah's allies.

Khalil is currently a member of the Lebanese Parliament and Hezbollah and its allies control majority seats in parliament.

The Shiite Amal group is headed by Lebanon's longtime Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and the Marada Movement is an organization allied with Hezbollah and Syrian President Bashar Assad's government.

The sanctions came as Lebanon grapples with an unprecedented economic and financial crisis and deals with the aftermath of a devastating explosion at Beirut's port that killed more than 190, wounded 6,500 and caused damage worth billions of dollars.

The sanctions also came as prime minister-designate Mustapha Adib works to form a new Cabinet to replace the one that resigned on Aug. 10, six days after nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate detonated in Beirut. The disaster fueled outrage against a ruling class that has run the country for decades amid widespread corruption and mismanagement.

Some analysts in Lebanon saw the sanctions as a message to Hezbollah's allies to review their links with the Iran-backed group, especially by targeting a Christian ally for the first time.

"Fenianos and Ali Hassan Khalil are two central figures in the coalition that is led by Hezbollah," said Ali Hamadeh, a political writer at An-Nahar newspaper who is often critical of the Iran-backed group.

He added that by sanctioning Fenianos, the US is sending a message to Frangieh, the Marada chief, who is a presidential hopeful. Hamadeh said Hezbollah's non-Shiite allies will now have to "think seriously about the repercussions of their relations with Hezbollah."

Amal denounced the US sanctions against one of its senior members in a statement on Wednesday, saying they infringe on Lebanon's sovereignty and will not succeed in extracting any concessions.

*(With Reuters and AP)*



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US sanctions Lebanese former ministers for corruption, supporting Hezbollah  
Lebanese army puts out fire at Beirut Port

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## [Storm in a teacup: Lebanon's president and 1.675 kilos of finest Ceylon brew](#)

Wed, 2020-09-09 23:07

BEIRUT: So you're the president of a country with a ruling elite widely held to be inept and corrupt, the economy is collapsing, and swaths of your capital city have been reduced to rubble by a devastating explosion.



It must be tempting just to sit down and have a nice cup of tea. But President Michel Aoun of Lebanon can't even do that without getting into hot water.

The trouble started brewing when the president's office published a photo last month of Aoun receiving the Sri Lankan ambassador, who said Colombo had "donated 1,675 kilos of Ceylon tea to those affected by the Beirut blast."

All well and good. The beleaguered residents of Gemmayze may have no homes, but at least they can be refreshed.

On Wednesday, however, it emerged that Aoun had written to Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa thanking him for the gift, which "was distributed to the families of the soldiers in the Presidential Guard Brigade."

And that's when it all boiled over. Aoun has a new social media hashtag – #TeaThief – and his conduct has been described as shameful, although admittedly not for the first time.

"The tea was sent to the Lebanese, particularly those affected by the explosion," said independent MP Paula Yacoubian. "Of course it wasn't a present for those who don't need it. Distributing the aid to your entourage is shameful."

الشاي ارسل الى اللبنانيين بخاصة المتضررين من انفجاركم وطبعاً لم يكن هدية لمن لا يحتاجها  
توزيع المساعدات على حاشيتك معيب #لبنان ينحدر مع عهدكم كما لم يفعل  
حتى في زمن الاقتتال في عهدكم السابق <https://t.co/XlweMGdYJu>

– بولا يعقوبيان (@PaulaYacoubian) [September 8, 2020](#)

One Lebanese Twitter user wrote: "Corruption in Lebanon continues. This government has 0 percent chance of changing."

Corruption in Lebanon continues. That government has 0% chance of changing. 100% wrong.

– Sunshine & Lollipops (@ljhinco) [September 9, 2020](#)



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