

One dead in Damascus blast on eve of polls

Sat, 2020-07-18 20:32

DAMASCUS: One person was killed and another wounded in two blasts Saturday in the Syrian capital, state news agency SANA said, on the eve of the country's third war-time parliamentary polls.

It said "one person was killed and another wounded in the explosion of two devices near Anas bin Malik mosque" in the Nahr Aisha area of southern Damascus.

There were no immediate details on the blasts near the mosque, where President Bashar Assad has attended prayers in the past, or the casualties. Syrians go to the polls Sunday to elect a new parliament as the Damascus government grapples with international sanctions and a crumbling economy after retaking large parts of the war-torn country.

Assad's Baath party and its allies are expected to win most of parliament's 250 seats in the first elections since 2016.

For the first time this year, there will be polling stations in former opposition bastions, including in the Eastern Ghouta region outside Damascus and in the south of Idlib province in the country's northwest.

Damascus has largely been secure since Russia-backed government forces expelled rebels and jihadists from the capital's doorstep in 2018.

Syria's war has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced millions from their homes since starting in 2011 with the repression of anti-government protests.



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War-torn Syria goes to the polls amid economic crisis Lebanon pushes for Syrian refugees to leave

[Egypt resumes flights to 14 international destinations, including Paris, New York and Sharjah](#)

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Fri, 2020-07-17 20:30

CAIRO: Egypt has announced the resumption of 14 new international flights, not including domestic flights and air cargo flights, daily to the capitals of the world that had been suspended due to the coronavirus.

EgyptAir, the national carrier of Egypt, said in a statement that the flights will be to Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Milan, London, Juba, Amman, New York, Sharjah and Tunisia in addition to two flights to Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

EgyptAir said that passengers will be told about the Covid-19 measures of each country they travel to in advance, and the safety and protective measures that must be taken while traveling on EgyptAir flights.

They will also be urged to reserve their tickets through the company website, where they will also be made aware of any changes in the operating schedule.

EgyptAir has drawn up a precautionary plan in cooperation with the authorities for the prevention of the coronavirus. The plan covers the stages of travel before, during and after the flight's arrival. Some of the measures include installing filters in the air conditioners of all EgyptAir aircraft that can capture up to 99 percent of viruses, microbes and bacteria, and making sure all crew members wear face masks and gloves.

EgyptAir also plans on allocating spaces for people with chronic diseases and those who are unable to wear face masks for long periods, as well as allocating the last two rows in the plane to isolate passengers who may have symptoms.

Roshdy Zakaria, president of the Holding Company for EgyptAir, said in a statement: "We are pleased to receive our customers on a national and international level as we start operating our flights with all preventive measures to reduce the coronavirus. This starts from the passengers entering the airport all the way until they reach their destinations."

Zakaria said that he hoped the coronavirus pandemic would end soon and for the return of flight traffic and operating schedules to their previous state as soon as possible. He added that he wanted people to enjoy the travel experience again, "as air travel remains the best way in the world in terms of safety and security."

Amr Abu El-Enein, president of EgyptAir Airlines, highlighted to the company's customers the importance of following the preventive instructions and travel advice to enjoy a safe trip.

Abu El-Enein stressed the importance of not reserving in person if possible, and instead going through the Egyptair.com website, the 1717 phone booking service or the mobile applications that the company provides in order to save time and effort and ensure the prevention of disease.

He also announced that the company was offering a 20 percent discount on many European destinations and to New York and Washington if tickets were purchased before Aug. 31.

Abu Al-Enein said that the gradual return of air traffic in Egypt, which started on July 1 and continues until now, is something that must be applauded, and will contribute to the return of normal life in Egypt. He said that the number of recent tourists showed that Egypt was safe in terms of security or health wise.



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Turkey moves toward social media restrictions

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ANKARA: The Turkish government is set to establish a parliamentary commission to further regulate the usage of social media platforms.

The launching of the "Digital Mediums Commission" coincides with the plans of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to adopt legislation to increase the government's control over free expression on social media.

The idea has been under discussion for a while, but after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's daughter Esra Albayrak was insulted on Twitter the government pressed ahead with designing a new legal framework to "abolish these platforms completely or to put them under control", said Erdogan, who thinks social media platforms that enjoy total freedoms do not suit the nation.

These remarks came some days prior to a live appearance of Erdogan on June 26 on YouTube to give a speech to youth, but his feed was overloaded with hundreds of thousands of dislikes and negative comments from young people saying "No Vote For You Again."

The draft legislation requires the appointment of Turkey representatives for social media providers, especially Twitter and Netflix to respond to legal requests.

The regulation would allow the government to implement access bans and impose legal and fiscal penalties.

The draft regulation with nine articles is expected to be adopted before parliament goes on vacation on July 24.

Suleyman Irvan, a professor of journalism from Uskudar University, said any restriction on social media may trigger anger from members of Generation Z. "Obliging social media providers to open an office in Turkey aims at implementing the court rulings about social media content, especially those related to the removal of content, and bringing huge amounts of fees that would discourage any anti-government contents in the future," he told Arab News.

The main opposition CHP thinks that the move primarily aims at curtailing people's freedoms. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, main opposition leader, criticized the legislation, claiming that it is because Erdogan received negative feedback from the online audience during his live speech.

“He understands what is going to come from Generation Z. Otherwise, why would this subject come to the fore now? We will defend the areas of freedom against this repressive mindset,” he recently said.

Ankara criticized Twitter last month for suspending more than 7,000 government-linked accounts associated with the AKP’s youth wing, saying it was part of a wider plan to smear the government and to intervene in domestic Turkish politics.

Twitter’s official figures show that 74 percent of the legal requests to remove Twitter content originated from Turkey. The latest “Blocked Web” annual report by Freedom of Expression Association said that access to a total of 408,394 websites was blocked from 2014 to the end of 2019.

Last year, access to 130,000 URL addresses, 7,000 Twitter accounts, 10,000 YouTube videos and 6,251 Facebook posts were blocked by the government. It also banned Twitter in 2014, though the ban was lifted within few weeks through a court ruling in the country which is a global leader in Twitter usage.

Erkan Saka, an expert in social media from Istanbul Bilgi University, does not expect fair recommendations from the commission as the majority of parliamentary commissions are controlled by the members of the ruling party. “The social media faces less control compared to the mainstream media and the government is keen to change this. This is a new step in legalizing restrictive measures that have intensified since the coup attempt in 2016,” he said.



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Hagia Sophia verdict seen as Erdogan's attempt to 'mask economic failure' Turkish court paves way to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque, Erdogan signs decree

Minister: Iraq to face severe water shortages as river flows drop

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By SAMYA KULLAB and RASHID YAHYA | AP

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Fri, 2020-07-17 15:27

DOHUK, Iraq: Iraq's minister of water resources says his country will face severe water shortages if agreements are not forged with neighboring Turkey over Ankara's irrigation and dam projects that have decreased river inflows to Iraq's parched plains.

Descending from the mountains of southeast Turkey and coursing through Syria and then Iraq before emptying out in the Arabian Gulf, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are Iraq's main water source and essential to for agriculture. But tensions have mounted over the years as Turkey pressed ahead with dam projects to meet its domestic electricity demands.

In turn, this has directly impacted water flows into Iraq.

Measurements of inflows from the border with Turkey in northern Iraq were 50% below average this year, Iraq's Water Resources Minister Mahdi Rashid Al-Hamdani said in an interview with the Associated Press on Thursday. This year also saw a reduction in annual rainfall by 50% compared to last year, he said.

"We asked our Ministry of Foreign Affairs to send an urgent message to Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to ask them what is the reason for the drop in our flow," he said.

Iraq is still waiting for a response, he added.

With the impacts of climate change, as well as future hydroelectric projects in Turkey, the ministry estimates Iraq will face a shortage of 10.5 billion cubic meters of water by 2035, according to an internal study, Al-Hamdani said.

Ordinary Iraqis have yet to fill the effects of the drop, partly because of the reservoir at the Hadhitha dam on the Euphrates River in Iraq, which is compensating for the shortage, he said.

In Fishkhabour, along the border with Turkey, Ramadan Hamza, a senior expert on water strategy and policy at the University of Dohuk, eyed the drop in river flows with concern.

"The water level of the Tigris River was around 600 cubic meters per second," he said. After Turkey built the so-called Ilisu Dam, "it dropped to around 300-320."

The Ilisu Dam on the Tigris, part of a megaproject by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is at the heart of the dispute. The dam, which became operational in May after three years of delay, is to be one of 22 power dams in southeastern Turkey. Negotiations over water allocations resumed when Ankara began to make progress on plans to fill the Ilisu reservoir last year but have since stalled.

Hezha Abdulwahed, the director of Dohuk's water department, said water levels had dropped by 8 billion cubic meters, compared to water flows in April 2019. "Iraq needs to put pressure on Turkey to release its share of water," Hamza said.

A recent report by the UN's International Organization for Migration found that water levels of the Tigris and Euphrates are decreasing at an "unprecedented rate," that could result in the forced displacement of entire Iraqi communities.

Water shortages, pollution and high levels of salinity lead to many Iraqis falling sick and prompted violent protests in the summer of 2018 across southern Iraq.

Many letters were sent to Ankara over its plans for the Ilisu dam, said Al-Hamdani, but Turkey only responded with "many excuses."

"They say it's their right to build a dam and we argue that it is harmful to our rights to water," he said.

The coronavirus pandemic postponed a face-to-face meeting with Turkish officials. The Iraqis have requested a video conference in the meantime to revive talks. Last year, an envoy of Erdogan came to Baghdad with an action plan to improve data sharing and management of water resources.

A Turkish official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not permitted to talk to journalists, said negotiations to ensure a certain amount of water allocations to Iraq are difficult because of climate change issues.

At one point, Iraq demanded Turkey ensure at least 500 cubic meters per second. "But inside Turkey, the Tigris sometimes doesn't go above 350 on average," he said. "It's hard to speak about certain limits of water – it's so unpredictable now."

In the absence of an international agreement, it also unclear what responsibilities Turkey has toward Iraq's water supply. But Al-Hamdani said there are international laws Iraq could turn to if needed to pressure Ankara. "Turkey's position will change," Al-Hamdani said on a hopeful note.



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Iraq to resume oil exports to Jordan
Turkish map of 'divided' Iraq triggers criticism

[Iranian hackers accidentally leak hack-training videos](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-07-17 18:49

LONDON: Iranian hackers accidentally leaked videos showing themselves teaching junior hackers how to break into email accounts and siphon data from them, it has been revealed.

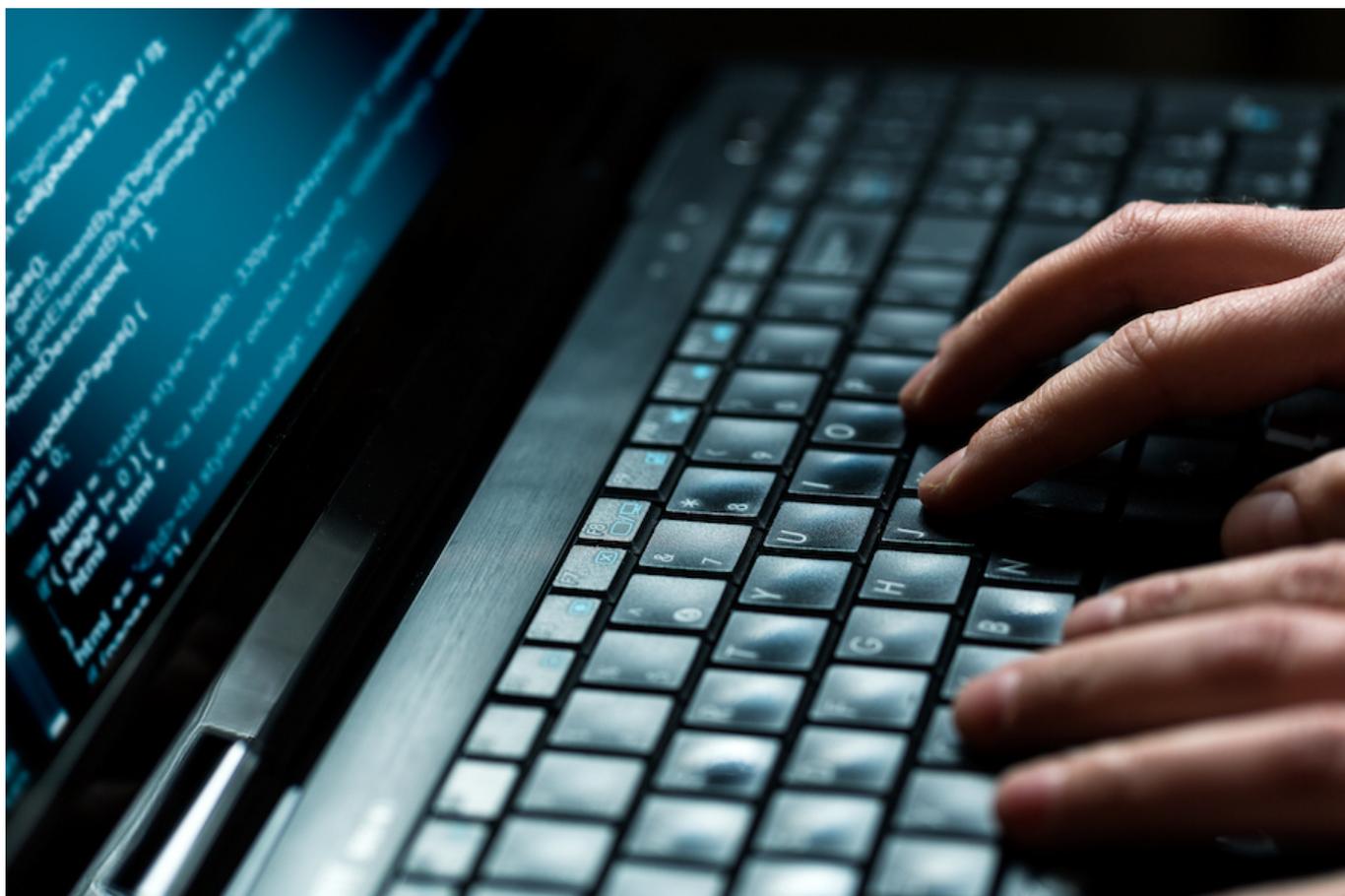
Employees at IBM's X-Force, the company behind the discovery, say that five hours of footage – recorded directly from the screen – has been obtained along with 40 gigabytes of information and data stolen from victim accounts.

The reports suggested that the files were uploaded accidentally to an exposed server in May that was being monitored by IBM.

“We don’t get this kind of insight into how threat actors operate really ever,” Allison Wikoff, a senior analyst at IBM X-Force, told Wired magazine.

“When we talk about observing hands-on activity, it’s usually from incident response engagements or endpoint monitoring tools,” she said, adding that, “Very rarely do we actually see the adversary on their own desktop. It’s a whole other level of ‘hands-on-keyboard’ observation.”

Among the targeted accounts were staffers at the US State Department, an Iranian-American philanthropist, as well as US and Greek military personnel.



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