

Houthis release abducted former Yemeni culture minister

Author:

Tue, 2020-04-21 00:47

AL-MUKALLA: The Iran-backed Houthi militia released Khaled Al-Ruwaishan, a former Yemeni culture minister and an outspoken writer, following a tribal mediation and public pressure, relatives and local media outlets said on Monday.

The Houthis came under huge local and international pressure after heavily armed gunmen stormed the house of the former minister and snatched him along on Sunday in the capital Sana'a. Abdul Qawi Al-Ruwaishan, a friend of Al-Ruwaishan, said that dozens of Houthis had besieged the former minister's house before smashing down the doors.

Local media said that powerful tribal leaders from Khawlan, Al-Ruwaishan's tribe, mediated his release without giving further information.

Yemen observers have linked the abduction to Al-Ruwaishan's most recent Facebook posts, in which he harshly criticized the Houthi handling of damage caused by heavy rains in areas under their control, and praising their opponents in Marib.

Since taking over power in late 2014, the Houthis have abducted hundreds of their opponents including journalists, politicians and activists, and forced hundreds of others into decamping to government-controlled areas or going into exile.

Abdullah Al-Mansouri, a brother of Tawfeq Al-Mansouri, one of four Yemeni journalists who were sentenced to death by a Houthi court early this month, called upon local and international rights groups to exert more pressure on Houthis until they released his brother and other detainees.

"The pressure that led to the release of Al-Ruwaishan and Al-Jubaihi must be maintained on the Houthis," Al-Mansouri told Arab News, referring to Yahya Al-Jubaihi, another Yemeni journalist who was sentenced to death by the Houthis in April 2017 and was released five months later following international uproar.

BACKGROUND

Since taking over power in late 2014, the Houthis have abducted hundreds of their opponents including journalists, politicians and activists, and forced hundreds of others into decamping to government-controlled areas or going into exile.

In the Red Sea town of Mocha, hundreds of government officials, army officers and soldiers and social dignitaries attended the funeral of Col. Mohammed Al-Sulaihi on Sunday, a government liaison officer who was shot by a Houthi sniper in Hodeidah.

Mourners carried Al-Sulaihi's coffin, wrapped in the Yemeni flag, to his home village in Taiz for burial. Al-Sulaihi died on Friday at a local hospital in the southern port city of Aden after sustaining critical wounds from the attack last month.

After mourning Al-Sulaihi's death, Yemen's Minister for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Al-Hadrami demanded UN monitors in Hodeidah move their headquarter from the Houthis controlled city to a neutral area, and to suspend their operation until the killers were brought to justice. "This is proof that the militias cannot be trusted," Al-Hadrami said on Twitter.

On the ground, fighting intensified between government forces and rebel fighters in the southern province of Dhale, where loyalists seized control of several villages, state media said on Monday.



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Houthis slammed for abducting former Yemeni culture minister
Shot by Houthis, Yemeni government liaison officer in Hodeida dies

[Kuwait expands curfew, extends public sector work suspension](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1587415717671682400

Mon, 2020-04-20 19:52

KUWAIT: Kuwait will extend the suspension of work in the public sector including at government ministries until May 31 and expand a nationwide curfew to 16 hours as part of efforts to combat the coronavirus, a government spokesman said on Monday.

He said in televised remarks that the 4 pm to 8 am curfew would go into effect at the start of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, which could fall on Thursday or later this week depending on the sighting of the new crescent moon.

Elsewhere in the Gulf region, Qatar said it would on Wednesday start to gradually lift a lockdown imposed since March 17 on a large section of an industrial zone, where many low-income migrant workers live and work and which had emerged as a hot spot for the virus.

Nearly 6,500 workers were moved into quarantine between April 14-17 as a precautionary step ahead of the opening of the area although they show no clear symptoms of the COVID-19 disease, a government spokeswoman said.

The Gulf region has seen an increasing number of infections among foreign workers living in overcrowded accommodation.

The number of cases in the six Gulf Arab states has risen steadily to surpass 28,000, with more than 170 deaths, despite containment measures including halting passenger flights, imposing curfews and closing most public venues.



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Kuwait, UAE continue repatriation of nationals stranded overseas amid coronavirus pandemic

[Wearing face masks, Syria's Assad and Iran's Zarif condemn West at Damascus meeting](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1587414518891625300

Mon, 2020-04-20 17:44

AMMAN: Syrian President Bashar Assad and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javid Zarif wore face masks on Monday for their meeting in Damascus where they said the West was exploiting the coronavirus pandemic for political ends, state media said.

State media said Assad conveyed condolences to Iran, where more than 5,200 people have died from the disease.

Echoing comments by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Zarif, who was also wearing gloves, was quoted as saying the US administration showed its "inhumane reality" by its refusal to lift sanctions on Syria and Iran when coronavirus was spreading around the world.

Assad said the handling of the crisis showed the West's moral failure.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has held out the possibility that the United States may consider easing sanctions on Iran and other nations to help fight the epidemic but given no concrete sign it plans to do so.

Speaking last month, Pompeo said humanitarian supplies were exempt from sanctions Washington reimposed on Tehran after President Donald Trump abandoned Iran's 2015 multilateral deal to limit its nuclear program.

The United States has also ratcheted up sanctions on Syria since the uprising against Assad began in March 2011. The State Department says it is "trying to deprive the regime of the resources it needs to continue violence against civilians."

The Syrian government says it has 39 confirmed cases of coronavirus and three dead. Medics and witnesses say there are many more. Officials, who deny any cover-up, have imposed a lockdown and measures including a night-time curfew to stem the pandemic.

The presence of thousands of Iranian militias fighting alongside Assad's forces in Syria and Iranian pilgrims have been cited by some medics and humanitarian workers as a main source of the contagion in Syria.



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Iran foreign minister to meet Assad in Syria on Monday
Syria Kurds set up first coronavirus hospital

[Is it the end of marketing influencers in coronavirus-hit Middle East?](#)

Mon, 2020-04-20 22:20

DUBAI: Few economic sectors can expect to avoid the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, whose global death toll has crossed the 150,000 mark. Although a handful of businesses are flourishing thanks to a surge in demand for their products and services, the overwhelming majority are busy counting the cost of precautionary measures such as lockdown and social distancing. Tourism, hospitality, air transport and entertainment are among the worst-hit

industries right now across the world, but the full list of the pandemic's economic victims is long and depressing.

Among the many entrepreneurs of the digital era who have been put in a precarious position due to the pandemic are social media influencers.

The most popular topics for sponsored posts on social media – fashion and beauty, travel and lifestyle – are also the most vulnerable in this extraordinary time.

The main reason for their sudden reversal of fortune is a rush by brands across the spectrum to tighten their budgets in a period of uncertainty.



Dina Ghandour. (Supplied)

The influencer marketing industry was predicted to grow to \$9.7 billion this year by “The State of Influencer Marketing 2020: Benchmark Report by Influencer Marketing Hub.”

But now collaborations, on which the influencer industry is heavily dependent, are starting to look grim.

“Before the pandemic, I had at least three to four clients per week, which were looking to review products or shoot items,” said Mohammad Khteeb, a 39-year-old Jordanian influencer.

“But after the pandemic (hit), many of those brands stopped. I now get one client every week or every two weeks. All of them are afraid to spend.”



Mohammed Khateeb. (Supplied)

Khateeb, whose Instagram account @its_mohd_khateeb has 946,000 followers, said brands were beginning to approach the situation by using a revenue-sharing model rather than a fixed cost.

"This means the risk of the campaign will be in two parts," he told Arab News. "So I'm trying to help and support some brands, and I moved with some of them to the revenue-sharing model."

According to Khateeb, the crisis has the potential to filter influencers' marketing and "clean up" social media platforms in the foreseeable future.

"Influencers who have personal content will remain," he said. "And the others will (fizzle out) by that time because they can't think of other ways to create good content from nothing."

Until the coronavirus pandemic hit, influencers had been playing an important part in brand sales.

The findings of the 2019 edition of the Social Media Influencers survey, commissioned by the Dubai-based BPG Group and the research agency YouGov, were an eye-opener.

The study found that 73 percent of respondents aged 18-35 across the UAE and Saudi Arabia had purchased a brand or tried a service based on a trusted social media influencers' recommendation.

Their areas of coverage ranged from entertainment, food and travel to tech, lifestyle, arts and culture, fashion and beauty.



Karen Whazen. (Supplied)

Now, as more people are encouraged to stay home to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infection, their online usage of social media is sharply increasing. Some influencers have found a way to limit the pandemic's damage by moving their work online and ensuring that their dependency on brands remains small enough.

"What I've seen is more home-grown brands reaching out to their community of influencers for support more than ever," said Dina Ghandour, a 34-year-old Canadian-Palestinian e-commerce business owner.

"And in the same way, I've felt much more inclined – in heart, space and time – to offer whatever support I can to small local brands."

The yoga teacher and manager of Yapparel, which has 17,400 followers, said she always made sure that a brand or "influenced collaboration" held a small percentage of her work.

READ MORE: [Celebrity, influencer agent Hady Hajjar: 'What you see on screens is not real life'](#)

In other words, the core of YApparel's business remained with her range of offered services. Such an arrangement has allowed her some leeway in an unstable and uncertain period, Ghandour said.

"So my online yoga classes and offerings have done really well in this time as people are home," she told Arab News.

"I believe these circumstances will help influencers change and upgrade their model of work. That could mean diversifying income or learning a new chargeable skill to share with one's community.

"Influencers should be flexible enough to support brands for less or no money, should they feel inclined to."

However, with retailers shutting their doors and countless employees being made redundant due to a lack of sales, many influencers are slowly but surely starting to pay the price as brands tighten their belts.

Gaenaelle Perrot, CEO of NEMOZENA, said the Emirati-owned brand designed and produced in Italy is stepping back from any new agreements with influencers and content creators for now, in view of the crisis impacting both businesses and individuals worldwide.

"As soon as the markets return to stability and the public are able to go back to their day-to-day routines, we as a brand will then look to resuming our digital and social activity, including our influencer program," Perrot said.

"The current global climate highlights our selection process when it comes to choosing influencers and, now more than ever, it amplifies our commitment to (our stated) criteria."



Alanoud Badr – also known as Fozaza. (Supplied)

Perrot was unable to share specific figures, but said the need to balance her budget applies to all her partnerships, particularly as the brand evolves.

“As this is our most direct way to communicate with both women as well as our clients, we remain positive and continue to have a clear vision of the influencers and women we want to work with,” she told Arab News.

“We’re therefore adapting our strategies and allocating budget to enact this. We always take great care with selecting influencers we wish to partner with, and our reasons have invariably gone beyond just the number of followers.”

As a brand, NEMOZENA considers a range of key factors, including the affinity of the influencer toward the brand identity, their personality, style of content creation and, most importantly, shared values.

“In comparison with other brands, we’re a lot more particular and gradual with our selection process,” Perrot said.

READ MORE: [COVID-19 and the power of social media influencers: Are they more important than ever?](#)

“This practice is incredibly important to us. We always strive to partner with influencers who empower women and demonstrate professional, cultural and creative leadership, which are strong components of our brand DNA.”

Perrot sees the unfolding crisis as an opportunity to adapt her brand’s strategy to the new market realities.

Her plan is to maintain – or even increase – her budget allocation for digital and social media activity once the pandemic abates.

“For the brand, this is an essential element that’s needed now more than ever, whereas other marketing activities we had planned throughout the year, such as events, are currently no longer required,” Perrot said.

“In these challenging times, we remain dedicated to keeping connected with our team, our agencies and the influencers we work with, even if we need to take a step back for a short while.”

With digital platforms and social media networks attracting record audiences and poised to maintain their dominance going forward, Perrot expects to see brands make more active use of influencers and digital strategies.

“Brands will need to refocus their marketing activities to work alongside real influencers with a purpose, a voice and a genuine influence, as opposed to just looking at their number of followers,” she said.

“Above all, in order to get back to business as quickly as possible, we encourage everyone to do whatever they can to stay safe and adhere to all precautions put in place following advice from governments and health officials around the world.”



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Celebrity, influencer agent Hady Hajjar: 'What you see on screens is not real life' COVID-19 and the power of social media influencers: Are they more important than ever?

[War-weary Libyans view virus lockdown as another inconvenience](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-04-20 00:19

TRIPOLI: Already tired of the tribulations of war, Libyans in the capital Tripoli are reluctant to respect intensified lockdown measures introduced on Friday to forestall coronavirus.

The round-the-clock curfew was flagged by the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) on Wednesday night and will apply for 10 days in areas under its control, although people are allowed to shop on foot between 7 a.m. and noon.

An earlier curfew had forbidden only nighttime movement. Driving is now banned.

Data from authorities shows 49 people have so far tested positive for coronavirus in the country.

Hassan, a 52-year-old who only gave his first name, ignored the restrictions as he drove to fill water containers, while artillery boomed in the distance. "I don't have a choice," he said. "With my back pain, I can't carry all this on foot" for 500 meters – the distance from his house to the well at the neighborhood mosque.

The capital's water supply has been cut since April 6 by an armed group in a region to the south under the control of Khalifa Haftar, the eastern-based strongman who has been fighting to seize Tripoli, the seat of the GNA, since last April.

Ahead of the driving ban, long queues formed outside petrol stations on Thursday. And while Tripoli's usual traffic has reduced, there are still cars on the road, particularly in the suburbs where there are few police to enforce the lockdown.

"There is nearly nothing around us, without a car we can't do the shopping, especially to buy cooking gas, milk or water containers ... only the bakery is within 500 meters of us," said Abdel Alim Al-Abded, who lives with his wife and three children on a family farm on the southeastern outskirts of Tripoli. With sheep, chickens, and outdoor space, the family has all the meat, eggs and vegetables they need. But most Libyans are not this self-sufficient and many have not received government salaries and pensions for months.

Meanwhile, the curfew has resulted in long queues outside stores, raising transmission risks. In the suburb of Janzour east of the capital, more than 100 men, women and children waited outside the only neighborhood bakery on Friday.

Baker Jamal Al-Nafati struggled to enforce social distancing requirements on his customers.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **The round-the-clock curfew was flagged by the UN-recognized Government of National Accord on Wednesday night and will apply for 10 days in areas under its control.**

- **Data from authorities shows 49 people have so far tested positive for coronavirus in the country.**

"We are trying to bake more bread early in the morning," he said. "But because of the health risks four of my employees have quit, leaving me with only three guys to do the work."

He continued: "It's difficult. I hope that opening hours for bakeries will be extended to reduce these queues."

While most Libyans consider the lockdown another frustration on top of existing wartime difficulties, for a privileged few it represents a chance to stretch their legs unhindered by traffic.

Hallouma, a retiree who only gave her first name, is finally wearing the trainers she bought years ago but never wore. Accompanied by her son "for more security," she said she was "profiting from the lockdown by going for a walk ... it's something rare for us."

Four young women wearing bright clothes said they had the same idea. "I never go out on foot, even to buy something from the corner store," said one.

"But with the curfew, we can be sure we won't be harassed by men in cars," said another.

Acknowledging limited compliance with the lockdown, the GNA Health Ministry reminded citizens of the rules on Saturday, warning of fines for those who ignored them.



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Face masks help Syrian Kurd refugee family integrate in France
Houthis slammed for abducting former Yemeni culture minister