

Lebanese activists and critics of Hezbollah face attacks, arrest and threats

Author:

Tue, 2020-02-25 01:29

BEIRUT: Activists in Lebanon, in particular those who speak out against Hezbollah, continue to face physical attacks, arrest, psychological pressure and threats to their families. The individuals being targeted include lawyers, journalists, media personalities and writers.

On Monday, Asrar Shebaro, a correspondent for An-Nahar newspaper, was attacked in a public place. It happened while she was working at Rafic Hariri International Airport in Beirut covering the arrival of a flight from Iran as part of a story about the response of Lebanese authorities to the coronavirus threat.

A video she filmed showed an unidentified young man attacking her and taking her phone by force. He told her she was not allowed to film in the airport because these were "families" there, which is a term Hezbollah uses to describe its supporters. The man deleted a number of videos Shebaro had filmed of passengers arriving from Iran. When she asked him under whose authority he was acting and who he represented, he said that he belonged to a political party.

In a message posted on the An-Nahar website, the newspaper said: "The bullying of the media and the truth will not dissuade this newspaper from completing its message by accurately conveying information and holding those responsible for their fragile measures taken to combat the Coronavirus."

Activists in Lebanon, especially Shiites, have faced threats as the protests against corruption, the financial crisis in the country, high levels of unemployment and the lack of basic services escalated. Some told Arab News they have been prevented from visiting their families in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and that pressure has been put on their relatives. In some cases, protesters have been forced to sleep in tents at protest sites or other locations.

"The pressure and attacks have diminished after a decision was taken to prevent the supporters of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah from confronting activists in the protest squares, but this does not stop moral pressure," said activist Mohamed Kassem, who is a secondary school teacher.

Protester Mahmoud Fakhri, who lives in Beirut, said he avoids neighborhoods dominated by the Amal Movement and Hezbollah.

"At the beginning of the revolution, the pressure on us was great but it decreased with the decline of the movement," he said. "Yet, we are still

cautious. For example, I do not go to my village in the south. There is real social hostility to us there. We were previously attacked in the Zuqaq Al-Blat area but nobody documents these attacks.”

Ali Al-Amin, another activist, said: “At the beginning of the protests, a number of Shiite clerics strongly participated but suddenly they disappeared from the protest sites. It was found that, in cooperation with security services that have good relations with Hezbollah, false charges were filed against one of them related to unpaid taxes, so he was arrested and held in custody for a few days. Another cleric...is still detained on another charge, and a third was severely beaten.”

The pressure exerted on activists is not limited to one particular social group. According to Al-Amin, the situation is “more complicated and linked to a range of internal and external issues ... Everyone who disagrees with Hezbollah is subject to repression and threats.”

Some protesters have faced arrest and detention as a result of opinions posted on social media. In the most recent case, activist Charbel Khoury was interrogated on Monday by the authorities about messages he had posted. His arrest was ordered by a judge alleged to be a supporter of the Free Patriotic Movement, while lawyers protested outside the Palace of Justice in Beirut to demand the independence of the judiciary from political influence.

One of Khoury’s lawyers described his arrest as a “judicial scandal. We have had enough of the suppression of the revolutionaries and the violation of freedom of opinion and expression. The Lebanese judiciary is today facing a major test.”

Al-Amin said: “The way in which Hezbollah suppresses militants differs from that of other parties. Hezbollah is a security party and it does not initiate a direct reaction; it refers the matter to the ‘family’ environment to exert pressure. And this (the family) of course does not operate on its own, but there is an apparatus that manages it and incites it.”

He added: “Despite the iron grip other parties have on their supporters, many of them came out from under the cloak of those parties and joined the protests and turned against their parties. But the Shiite community is still governed by a security apparatus that even controls the security institutions of the state.”

A passenger on a flight from Qom in Iran tested positive for the coronavirus last Thursday. It was the first case discovered in Lebanon. Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah said that focusing on the issue of people traveling from Iran to Lebanon and calling for flights to be grounded “is a politicization of the issue.”



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Lebanese scouts group investigated over Hezbollah link
Hezbollah slammed for unveiling Soleimani monument in Lebanon

[Family of Egyptian militant 'not aware of his fate'](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-02-25 01:06

CAIRO: The family of the convicted top Egyptian militant Hisham Al-Ashmawy has not been formally notified about his execution on Monday, said his lawyer Khaled El-Masry.

Earlier, the online website of state news paper Al-Ahram, and the private pro-government Al-Shorouk and Al-Watan dailies reported Ashmawy had been executed but later removed their reports from their websites.

"I think the media reports about his execution are not true especially after the media websites removed the reports," said Masry.

Three security sources had also said Al-Ashmawy had been executed. An Egyptian military source, however, said the reports were not true.

Al-Ashmawy, a former Egyptian special forces officer, was convicted on several charges, including plotting a 2014 attack that killed 22 military guards, and the attempted assassination of a former interior minister in 2013, the military said in November.



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Egypt military court condemns high-profile militant Ashmawy to death
Egypt militant returned from Libya back on trial: media

[Yemen envoy to US says Houthi escalation spoils peace hopes](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-02-25 00:41

AL-MUKALLA: Yemen was forced to use the military option to pressure the Iranian-backed Houthis to come to the negotiating table since they never complied with peace deals, the country's ambassador to the US has told Arab

News.

"The military option has never been our choice or something that we initiated," Ahmed bin Mubarak said.

"The government has always sought peace since the beginning of the war by signing the Peace and National Partnership Agreement," he said, referring to the first peace deal that the internationally recognized government signed with the Houthis, which was designed to defuse the tension caused by the rebels' takeover of Sana'a.

Fighting in Yemen has escalated over the past couple of months following Houthi drone and missile attacks that killed more than 110 soldiers and civilians at a military base in the city of Marib.

The Houthis intensified attacks on government forces in Nehim, outside Sana'a, Marib's Serwah and the northern province of Jawf.

Hundreds of soldiers and civilians have been killed since early last month.

The Yemeni ambassador said that the latest Houthi escalation in shelling and fighting coincided with intensive diplomatic efforts by the UN envoy to Yemen and European diplomats who sought to break the impasse in peace talks.

The escalation during peace efforts, Bin Mubarak said, is a sign that the Houthis are not serious about peace.

"Any concrete advance in peace efforts and addressing important issues are always matched with an escalation by the Houthis. We have no other choice but to defend ourselves against the escalation," he said, adding that the Houthis read concessions by the government as signs of weakness. Instead of reciprocating the concessions by making similar concessions, they launched attacks on government forces.

"The intensity of Houthi attacks on Jawf shows that they have been preparing for the escalation for a long time," Bin Mubarak said.

Bin Mubarak, who holds a Ph.D. in business administration from Baghdad University, was President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi's chief of staff when Houthis seized the capital and placed Hadi under house arrest in early 2015. He was detained by the Houthis for two weeks. In July 2015, he was appointed as ambassador of the Republic of Yemen to the US. He has served as a senior adviser in Yemeni government delegations during the several rounds of UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva, Biel and Kuwait.

He is also nonresident ambassador of Yemen to Brazil.

Last year, fighting on major battlefields largely subsided as UN Yemen Envoy Martin Griffiths announced that the number of air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition dropped by nearly 80 percent.

FASTFACTS

- **Ahmed bin Mubarak, who holds a Ph.D. in business administration from Baghdad University, was appointed as ambassador of the Republic of Yemen to the US in July 2015.**
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Those signs were seen as goodwill indicators by the Saudi-led coalition and the Yemeni government. In 2019, many Yemen watchers predicted that the country was inching closer to a peace deal.

The mood changed when Houthis bombed a mosque and killed 100 soldiers. "We are now far from peace as a result of the escalatory steps taken by Houthis on more than one front," he said. The military pressure in the western province of Hodeida convinced the Houthis to go to Stockholm to sign a peace deal with the government in 2018, he said.

"Without the Hodeida (military) operation and reaching 3 km from Hodeida seaport, the Houthis would not have come to Stockholm."

The Yemeni diplomat links the government's participation in future talks with the Houthis to making progress in the implementation of Stockholm Agreement terms.

"We have reiterated that there should be confidence-building measures to show that this group (the Houthis) are serious. We cannot accept that the international community asks for pushing forward and forgetting what happened," he said, adding that there had been no big change on the ground since the Stockholm Agreement. The Houthis have not pulled out of Hodeida seaport or agreed to stop hostilities in the city.

In March, Yemenis will mark the fifth anniversary of the Saudi-led military operation that titled the balance of the war in favor of government forces. Bin Mubarak said that the Saudi-led coalition disrupted Iranian designs in Yemen and salvaged Yemeni and Arab national security.

"Without this intervention, Iran would have expanded its influence in the region and fulfilled its dream of seizing control of four Arab capitals," he said.

Regarding the power-sharing agreement that the government signed with the separatist Southern Transitional Council in Riyadh last year, Bin Mubarak said that the agreement has unified the Yemeni forces that oppose Iran's scheme in Yemen. His government is still committed to the deal despite failing to meet some deadlines.

"We fully trust the brothers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and are convinced that they will make every effort to pressure the parties to implement the terms of the agreement," he said. The implementation of the agreement would pave the way for long-sought reform in the government's security and military bodies, he said.





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UN: Libya's warring sides agree to lasting cease-fire deal
Turkey's casualties in Libya stir debate among public

[Iraqi nurse spends her weekends stitching wounds at protest site](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-02-25 00:39

BAGHDAD: Hannaa Jassem bends over a patient in a makeshift clinic on the edge of Baghdad's Tahrir Square, one of a handful of women in an overwhelmingly male world of demonstrations and political confrontation.

The 24-year-old works as a nurse in a hospital in Iraq's capital during the week, and volunteers at its main protest site at weekends.

As teargas spreads outside, Jassem stitches up wounds in an open-fronted shack supported by metal poles with walls covered in national flags, banners and blue plastic sheeting.

She said her brother initially supported her decision to look after people taking part in the wave of anti-government protests.

"He was proud that his sister was a medic in Tahrir," she said.

“But later he became apprehensive as things got more dangerous.”

Some politicians and influential clerics have been outraged by the sight of young women out in public during the demonstrations in Baghdad and across the south.

But that hasn't stopped Jassem. “Change is what drove me to be a medic and go to protest sites. We are sick of the current situation in terms of rights or being safe or having any security in Iraq.”

On top of her nursing job, she also works part time as a portrait photographer. That still leaves here the weekends for the protest clinic.

“I always say that if I had enough time I would go to Tahrir every day but my responsibilities at work and home get in the way.”



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Iraqi security forces open fire on Baghdad protesters
Iraq's Sadr warns MPs against rejecting new govt

[Syrian capital rocked by explosions as Israel hits targets](#)

Mon, 2020-02-24 00:39

DAMASCUS: Israeli fighter jets launched air strikes on suspected Islamic Jihad positions in Syria, the Israeli military said on Monday, after the militant group and Israel exchanged rockets and air strikes around Gaza.

An Israeli military statement said its forces had “struck Islamic Jihad terror targets south of Damascus” in addition to “dozens” of Islamic Jihad targets throughout the Gaza Strip.

The air strike in the Adeliyah region outside Damascus targeted what the Israeli military called “a hub of Islamic Jihad’s activity in Syria,” including the research and development of weapons.

The Israeli announcement came shortly after Syrian state media said its air defenses had intercepted “hostile targets” over the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Residents said multiple explosions shook Damascus for about 15 minutes as air defenses fired back.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the Syrian conflict, said the explosions resulted from Israeli bombing of suspected Iranian-backed militias in the vicinity of Damascus International Airport.

The strike escalated the latest round of hostilities, which began around dawn on Sunday, when, Israel said, its troops killed an Islamic Jihad member who was trying to plant explosives near Israel’s border fence with the Gaza Strip.

Video footage shot by a Gaza photographer and widely posted on social media showed what appeared to be the lifeless body of an Islamic Jihad militant dangling from an Israeli military bulldozer as it removed the corpse.

Palestinian health officials and other onlookers said two other Palestinians were wounded by Israeli gunfire directed at a group of people who had approached the area and tried to recover the body.

The images caused an uproar in Gaza, with many social media commentators calling for retaliation.

Islamic Jihad fired a barrage of rockets from Gaza into Israel, setting off air-raid sirens in communities such as Ashkelon. Israel hit back with a series of air strikes in Gaza.

The rockets sent residents of southern Israel running for shelters. Some of the rocket fire was intercepted by Israeli aerial missile defenses, and there were no reports of any Israelis injured.

The Israeli military said that among the “dozens” of targets struck in Gaza were underground infrastructure and compounds in Rafah that had been used to store raw material used for manufacturing rockets.



A ball of fire is seen following an Israel airstrike at Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip early on Feb. 23, 2020. On Sunday night, Israeli aircraft also hit suspected Islamic Jihad sites in Damascus, Syria. (AFP / SAID KHATIB)

Shortly before midnight on Sunday, the Syrian state news agency SANA quoted a military source saying that Israeli planes had entered Syrian airspace and targeted areas around Damascus with a wave of guided missiles.

Syrian state-run Al-Ikhbariya TV aired footage of what it said were explosions set off in the Damascus night sky by the air defense system shooting down missiles.

The Syrian military source said most missiles were destroyed before reaching their targets and that the aftermath of the strike was being examined.

Israel frequently strikes at targets inside Syria, but has largely refrained from public admissions of its covert military operations there.

Iran is an ally of Damascus and has offered military advisers and sent militiamen and material support to help President Bashar Assad's government forces in the nine-year civil war.

Israel considers Iran a national security threat and says it won't tolerate Iran's presence on its borders.

In November, Israel targeted two senior Islamic Jihad commanders in a simultaneous attack, killing one in the Gaza Strip and missing the second in Syria.

At the time, Israeli warplanes fired three missiles at the home of Akram Al-Ajouri, a member of Islamic Jihad's leadership living in exile. He was not harmed, but his son and granddaughter were killed.





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