

Iraqis launch boycott of \$9bn imports from Iran

Author:

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BAGHDAD: Iraqi protesters have launched a new weapon aimed at weakening Iran's grip on their political system – a boycott of Iranian products in stores and markets.

With the slogan "Let them rot," young Iraqis in particular are refusing to buy anything imported from Iran, from fruit and vegetables to cheese and yogurt.

Instead, pop-up markets at protest camps are offering food stamped with "Made in Iraq" labels. "It allows us to create jobs for Iraqis and means our money stays in the country," said protester Hatem Karim, 24. "We must ... support our own national production."

Iran exports \$9 billion worth of products to Iraq every year, 10 times the amount of trade in the opposite direction. A successful boycott would be a significant blow to the Iranian economy, already crippled by US sanctions.

Mass protests have gripped Iraq since Oct. 1 as demonstrators demand an end to Iranian meddling and reform of a corrupt political system that keeps them in poverty. More than 450 people have been killed in an anti-protest crackdown led by Iran-backed militias and directed by Gen. Qassim Soleimani, head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Iraq's parliament approved a new electoral law on Tuesday to make elections fairer, but political deadlock is still holding up the selection of an interim prime minister, threatening renewed unrest.

The new law will allow voters to elect individual members of Parliament instead of choosing from party lists, and each MP will represent a specific electoral district instead of the current system of groups representing entire provinces.

"This decision is the decision of the people, the people who were patient here in Tahrir Square," said Baghdad protester Dawood Salman, 58. "They made their decision known, which is for elections to be individual, 100 percent."

Another protester, Hashim Mohammed, said: "Hopefully this is a sign of things to come, this is the first step toward meeting our demands. We now want ... a president, prime minister, and speaker who do not belong to any political party."

Adel Abdul Mahdi resigned as prime minister last month under pressure from street protesters, but he remains in a caretaker capacity. The constitutional deadline to name a replacement expired last Thursday.

“We need a true Iraqi, someone honest and honorable,” protester Hashim said.



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Iran arrests family of young man killed in 'riots' Iraqi parliament approves new election law, deadlock over PM remains

[Lebanese resort to wheat cultivation amid famine fears](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-25 01:05

BEIRUT: On the eve of the Christmas holidays, shopping malls throughout Lebanon were limited to selling only food.

The country has been hampered by an economic recession and political crisis for more than two months, creating financial and security chaos.

Nicolas, a father of four who owns a toy store in Beirut, said: “Sales are slow. At this time of the year, we usually cannot handle the number of customers, but this year, people are extremely hesitant to buy expensive

gifts, and are choosing less expensive ones.”

Fear has risen due to analysts and political leaders warning of a possible famine, and the start of 2020 being harsher than recent months.

Head of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt warned that “Jabal (Lebanon’s Druze-inhabited mountainous areas) and the entire country are on the brink of hunger” in a voice message sent over WhatsApp to Lebanese living abroad.

Jumblatt suggested some measures to support the party from abroad to address the risks, notably distributing food rations, encouraging wheat, lentil and bean cultivation and providing a stock of medicines.

Members of the party distributed food supplies to the needy in deprived areas. People have started considering alternative crops to address the famine. Imad, a landowner in the Bekaa governorate, said he will start cultivating wheat.

Khadija, Lebanese citizen from a southern village, said the “the municipality of the village has urged all landowners who are currently not using their lands to declare them so that the municipality can cultivate wheat and support the needy.”

Caretaker Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil had earlier reassured the Lebanese, stressing that “they have nothing to worry regarding the salaries of public sector employees,” despite up to 50 percent of their salaries being deducted due to the crisis and dozens of employees losing their jobs due to bankruptcy.

On Tuesday, the Lebanese lined up outside banks to receive what little is still allowed by the banks’ restrictive procedures, where cash withdrawals have been limited to \$100 at some banks.

At a bank in the northern city of Tripoli, tensions soared as clients struggled to withdraw their money on the eve of the holiday.

Some people gathered outside the banks to denounce the policy, which required the intervention of the army and internal security forces to reduce tensions. Some money exchange houses and the black market have been charging rates above the official peg of 1,507 pound to the dollar, and selling it for up to 2,100 pounds.

Hassan Khalil warned two days ago that Lebanon “cannot survive long without a government.”

He said: “We have covered the state’s claims on time and we have also issued treasury bonds in the Lebanese pound at very low interest rates, which have helped us reduce the deficit, which will increase by more than was previously expected.”

Economic Expert Issam Al-Jurdi said that “the Lebanese have been waiting for signs to be reassured about their money, but silence has increased their

fears, pushing them to believe that the matter is much more than a liquidity problem.”

On Tuesday, dozens of students gathered outside the Bank of Lebanon in Beirut to denounce the national economic and financial policies. They distributed flyers carrying the hashtag #We_Are_Not_Paying, urging the Lebanese to stop paying taxes, fees and their bank loans until the restoration of their rights.

In a meeting with Lebanese businessmen, banking expert Nassib Ghobril said that “despite the difficult crisis and restrictive banking procedures, Lebanon is still capable of recovering from the crisis if an effective government starts working on the required reforms program.”

Ghobril added that the crisis is due to “the lack of confidence in the state and a programmed plan to hit trust in the banking sector, creating a serious panic among the Lebanese and pushing them to keep big amounts of money at their homes, which has led to the interruption of liquidity.”

He said: “The situation will only gradually recover with the formation of an effective government that is supported and trusted by the people and the international community and that starts implementing reforms.



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Lebanon banks 'trapping' state salaries: minister
Lebanon's population hits 4.8m with 20% non-Lebanese

Bethlehem prepares for Christmas

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-25 01:02

BETHLEHEM: Many Christians in Palestine like to celebrate Christmas by visiting the town of Bethlehem, where Jesus Christ was born.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims cover the region, also visiting Nazareth and Jerusalem.

Najwan Saifi and her sister and mother visit Bethlehem "almost every year" at Christmas.

"We come to this city, spend a day or two in a hotel and enjoy the atmosphere, the wonderful celebrations, away from the daily pressures of life and work," Saifi said.

"Sometimes I feel sad that not all Palestinians can come to Bethlehem. There are thousands of people who want to visit, but the barriers and the wall remain, preventing many people. I hope the occupation will one day disappear," She added

In Bethlehem the pilgrimage route known as Star Street is being renovated in the hope that it will return to its former glory: A bustling thoroughfare of historical importance.

Downtown Bethlehem, the commercial heart, is mostly bypassed in favor of the more well-known ancient site: The church built on top of the grotto where Christ was born.

"We are expecting 1.4 million tourists," said Anton Salman, the mayor of Bethlehem, adding that he could only go on figures from organized groups, and that the number could be much higher.

That estimate would still represent a near 20 percent increase from 12 months ago in any event. "Things are going up. This year is better than 2018, and 2018 was better than 2017. It is a continuous increase."

Israel's settlements in the West Bank and its separation wall, which divides Bethlehem from Jerusalem, have restricted access to the city and devastated the local economy.

Twenty-three Israeli settlements take up 21 square km of the Bethlehem area, hosting 165,000 Israeli settlers.

Before Christmas Eve, Manger Square in Bethlehem, which the mayor's office overlooks, is abuzz with tourists taking selfies by the newly lit tree erected at its center by the municipality.

Fadi Kattan, a Palestinian chef who runs Hosh Al-Syrian guesthouse, believes tourism should extend beyond the Christmas season and that changes should be made to entice visitors to stay in Bethlehem during the rest of the year.

"Tourists usually spend a few hours in Bethlehem – that is not enough for the city's economy. The real impact would be if they stayed in the hotels and spent a long time," Kattan said.

As for gift shop owner Saad Sabbagh, the Christmas season is a working season for Bethlehem's residents, and an opportunity for its economy to recover.

"There are many difficulties, but we are thinking about this season, working and receiving tourists from all over the world. There is already an increase this year in the number of tourists, and work is increasing," Sabbagh said

Five new hotels are being built and some existing hotels are expanding. The town has even extended the opening hours of the Church of the Nativity. The building has undergone extensive restorations since 2013 to repair its leaky roof, tattered windows and covered mosaics.

The region's Christians were excited earlier in the year, on Nov. 29, when a religious relic sent to Rome in the seventh century, supposedly a fragment of Christ's manger, was returned to the Holy Land after nearly 1,400 years by Pope Francis. It is now on permanent display at the church.

Visits to Bethlehem during the holidays are not confined to Christians, with thousands of Muslim Palestinians from the West Bank and Israel also expected over the period.

Ahmad Najib, on holiday with his wife and two children, said: "The atmosphere of Christmas is beautiful, and in Bethlehem it is the most beautiful, especially on Christmas Eve. I am here with my family to enjoy taking pictures, and share with Christians their holidays just as they share ours."



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Bethlehem welcomes pilgrims for Christmas celebrations
Carols and bells in Bethlehem as festive season draws near

[Turkey's 'crazy' canal plan runs into wave of criticism](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-25 00:56

ANKARA: Turkey is hoping to begin work on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Canal Istanbul – a gigantic shipping project that even the Turkish leader has described as “crazy” – after the scheme was given an environment green light on Monday.

The mega-project will involve the building of a 45 km shipping canal on the edge of Istanbul that supporters say will rival the Suez Canal.

Viewed as a “signature project” by the ruling AKP government, the canal is expected to ease shipping congestion in the adjacent Bosphorus Strait and will carry up to 160 vessels a day when it is completed in 2025.

However, the scale and cost of the project have drawn criticism from several quarters, including Ekrem Imamoglu, Istanbul's opposition mayor, who says the canal will have a devastating environmental impact and will be difficult to finance.

"This city is a gift of God. Do not betray this city," he said last month.

Although his concerns have been dismissed by the government, Imamoglu is calling for a referendum on the project, which is expected to cost about \$15 billion.

Erdogan has rejected the Imamoglu's comments, saying: "The mayor is claiming Canal Istanbul is not suitable. Mind your own business."

However, Yoruk Isik, an Istanbul-based independent geo-analyst, told Arab News that it is unclear if the Canal Istanbul project has received environmental clearance. "It's more likely that the Turkish president is trying to jump the gun and declare victory on the issue," he added.

Another concern is that the canal might jeopardize the Montreux Convention, the 1936 agreement that gives Turkey control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, limiting warships' access to the strategic waterways.

Ilker Basbug, Turkey's former chief of staff, criticized the canal scheme, saying that if conditions change under the project, member states could annul or ignore the convention.

The agreement allows civilian ships to use the straits in peacetime, but restricts warships' access to the Black Sea.

But while the Bosphorus and Dardanelles – both natural waterways – are regulated by the convention, Canal Istanbul, as a man-made canal, would be overseen by Turkish authorities.

"The convention has prevented an arms race in the Black Sea and maintained peace," Isik said.

According to Isik, Russia views the convention as vitally important to its security and economy, and will never agree to any changes in the agreement.

If the new canal is opened to warships, a serious political crisis could emerge with Russia, Isik said.

"From the historical Turkish perspective, the Montreux Convention (is one of) the founding documents of the Turkish republic. Opening it to discussion is self-defeating and could only be described as a short-sighted domestic policy maneuver," he said.

The ambitious canal project will also incorporate new residential and business areas, leading critics to claim that it is a "real estate" project.

Financing of the canal in a country where economic deterioration has become widespread, is also a divisive issue.



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Strikes kill 8 in Syria's Idlib as Turkey, France urge de-escalation
Greece pushes back at Turkey over energy race, Libya: analysts

[Iran arrests family of young man killed in 'riots'](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-25 00:47

TEHRAN: Iran has arrested the family of a young man killed in street violence that flared during last month's protests against fuel price hikes, Mehr news agency reported on Tuesday.

The family of Pouya Bakhtiari, who was "killed suspiciously during the recent riots," had been invited for talks with authorities, Mehr said, citing what it called an informed source.

They were found to have been "carrying out a counter-revolutionary project" and "anti-structural activities," said the agency, which is close to moderate conservatives in Iran.

"Consequently, these elements were arrested by a judicial order in order to protect the order and the security of the honorable people and others damaged

by the rioters," it said without specifying which family members were taken into custody.

Bakhtiari was reportedly killed in Karaj city, west of Tehran, in street violence that erupted in mid-November during nationwide protests over a shock decision to hike petrol prices by as much as 200 percent. He was 27. His Instagram account, which is now reportedly run by his father, announced a ceremony marking 40 days since his death would be held at Karaj cemetery on Thursday.

It was still active with more than 18,000 followers on Tuesday.

Officials in Iran have yet to issue an overall death toll for the unrest, but international human rights group Amnesty International has put the number at more than 300.

An Iranian security official rejected a foreign media report on Monday that the figure was as high as 1,500, saying it was based on "false propaganda."

BACKGROUND

"This way of news writing and making accusations is essentially nothing special," said Alireza Zarifian Yeganeh, head of the information and communications secretariat of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Quoted by the Tasnim news agency, he dismissed the reports as "a series of ludicrous claims."

"And when you would ask this media about its source, it would refer to some invisible creatures and there is no possibility of verification."

The days of unrest in Iran from Nov. 15 saw police stations attacked, shops looted and banks and petrol stations torched as authorities imposed a weeklong internet blackout.

Videos that have surfaced since purport to show scenes from the crackdown that followed, including footage of security forces firing at unarmed demonstrators or beating them with batons.

The US, France and Germany have all condemned Iran over the bloodshed.

Iran has repeatedly denied casualty figures issued abroad.

In a report on Dec. 2, state television charged that foreign media had been "hyping up" the death toll.

It also said that security forces "had no choice but to resort to authoritative and tough confrontation in order to save people from the hands of the rioters, and a number of rioters were killed."



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Amnesty raises to 304 number of Iranians killed in protests
Fresh protests claim more victims in southern Iran