

Cleric Al-Sadr urges rivals to help oust Iraq's prime minister

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NAJAF: The Iraqi cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr joined thousands of demonstrators in the holy city of Najaf on Tuesday amid a spiralling political crisis sparked by deadly anti-government protests.

At least 240 people have died and 8,000 been wounded since demonstrations broke out on Oct. 1 over unemployment and corruption, before evolving into calls for the government to quit.

Al-Sadr has spearheaded demands for Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi's resignation and early parliamentary elections.

He later called on his biggest political rival to work with him on ousting the country's prime minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi. Al-Sadr, who leads parliament's largest bloc, asked Hadi Al-Amiri, leader of the second-largest, to help him introduce a vote of no confidence.

On Tuesday, Al-Sadr was spotted by an AFP correspondent amid thousands of anti-government demonstrators in his native Najaf, a holy city in southern Iraq.

He was seen in a white car in the city just after airport sources told AFP he had landed from neighboring Iran.

Al-Sadr himself is one of the current government's two main sponsors, after his Sairoon bloc won the largest share of parliament's 329 seats in a vote last year.

But he tweeted in support of an initial six-day wave of protests that rocked the country early this month and resumed last week.

Demonstrators have so far been unimpressed by premier Abdul-Mahdi's laundry list of reforms, which includes hiring drives and more social welfare.

Instead, they have increasingly pushed for early elections, a new government and a reworked constitution.

After failing to meet several times, parliament on Monday agreed to explore early polls and constitutional amendments, summoning Abdel Mahdi for questioning.

They reiterated their demand Tuesday, calling on him to appear at parliament headquarters "immediately."

In footage aired on local media, MPs from the largest bloc of Sairoon – tied to Al-Sadr – could be heard chanting, "At once! At once!"

The parliament is deeply divided, with Al-Sadr backing protests while second-largest bloc Fatah – the political branch of the Hashed Al-Shaabi paramilitary force – backs the government.

Several Hashed offices have been torched in recent days in southern Iraq in what observers say is likely an escalation of the rivalry between Al-Sadr and

the Hashed.

Abdul-Mahdi has urged Al-Sadr to agree with Fatah chief Hadi Al-Ameri on a way forward.

"If the goal of elections is to change the government, then there is a shorter way: for you to agree with Mr. Ameri to form a new government," the premier wrote in a public letter to the cleric on Tuesday.

"Once this agreement is reached, the prime minister can submit his resignation and the new government can receive its orders in days, if not hours," said Abdel Mahdi.

He dismissed the idea of bringing forward polls, saying, "But the fate of early elections would be unknown. Will its results be definitive?"

The chaotic protest movement is unprecedented in Iraq, both because of its apparently independent nature and the ensuing violence.

The first wave of protests starting October 1 left 157 people dead, mostly protesters in Baghdad, according to a government probe which acknowledged "excessive force" was used.

A second wave starting Thursday has left at least 83 dead.

Overnight, at least one protester was killed in the Shiite holy city of Karbala, said the Iraqi Human Rights Commission.

The city's forensics chief told AFP a 24-year-old had been shot in the head, but the governor and security forces said it was "categorically false" anyone had died.

Rallies escalated on Tuesday, with trade unions representing teachers, lawyers and dentists all declaring strikes lasting several days.

In Iraq's southern cities of Hilla, Diwaniyah, Kut and Nasiriyah, most government offices remained closed on Tuesday for lack of staff.

Students gathered in those cities for their third day of demonstrations, ignoring orders by the higher education minister to return to class.

In the capital, protesters were massing on a key bridge linking their main gathering place in Tahrir Square to the Green Zone, where government offices and foreign embassies are based.

They managed to breach a first barrier set up by security forces, who have been holding back demonstrators there in recent days with volleys of tear gas.

Many had spent the night in tents or abandoned buildings in Tahrir in defiance of a curfew declared by the army.

"Their curfew changed nothing," 30-year-old protester Duaa said on Tuesday morning.

"Did the government think we would stay at home? No way."

About 60 percent of Iraq's 40-million population is under the age of 25.

But youth unemployment stands at 25 percent, while one in five people live below the poverty line, despite the vast oil wealth of OPEC's second-largest crude producer.

"We don't want this government any more. We want a transitional government and constitutional change," another female protester said.

"I'm a teacher, I have a salary, I have a house – but the young unemployed people are my brothers and relatives, too."



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Masked men attack protesters in Iraq's Karbala, killing 18 Iraqi PM Abdul-Mahdi refuses to resign over deadly protests

[Pullout of Kurdish forces in northern Syria complete: Moscow](#)

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Tue, 2019-10-29 15:13

MOSCOW: Russia said Tuesday that Kurdish forces in northern Syria had withdrawn from areas along Turkey's border as planned under a deal between Moscow and Ankara.

"The withdrawal of armed units from territory where a security corridor

should be created has been completed ahead of time,” Russian news agencies quoted Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu as saying on a visit to Armenia. “Syrian border guards and our military police have been deployed there,” Shoigu told his Armenian counterpart Davit Tonoyan. A deadline for the withdrawal had been set at 6:00 p.m. local time (1500 GMT) on Tuesday.

Last week Russia and Turkey signed a deal for Russian military police and Syrian border guards to “facilitate the removal” of Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) from within 30 kilometers (18 miles) of the border. The Turkey-Russia agreement was reached after marathon talks between President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.



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[Ex-Shin Bet head: Territorial](#)

expansion 'will be the end of Israel'

Tue, 2019-10-29 01:54

CHICAGO: A former head of Israel's Shin Bet secret service warned a gathering of American Jews on Saturday that his country's efforts to expand its borders and block the creation of a Palestinian state "will be the end of Israel."

Ami Ayalon, who headed Shin Bet from 1995 until 2000 and served as commander in chief of Israel's navy, opened the annual J Street convention in Washington on Saturday.

Saying Israel is in crisis, Ayalon warned: "The continuation of the occupation is the single greatest threat to Israel's safety and our existence as a democracy."

Ayalon, who is part of the opposition Blue and White political party, said expanding his country's borders "will isolate Israel even more and increase anti-Semitism around the world."

It "will be the end of Israel as the founding fathers of Zionism envisioned it," he added.

The continuation of the occupation is the single greatest threat to Israel's safety and our existence as a democracy.

Ami Ayalon, former head of Shin Bet secret service

Ayalon said Israel has succeeded in terms of Arab acceptance of it based on the 1967 borders.

He cited the 1979 peace deal with Egypt, Palestinian recognition of Israel's right to exist, the 1994 peace deal with Jordan, and the Arab League's decision in 2002 to recognize Israel in exchange for a full withdrawal from occupied Arab territories.

"We in Israel ... continue to fight ... a war in order to expand our border to the east, to build more settlements, and to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state next door," he said.

"That ... is not a just war. It denies the Palestinian right to self-determination, which was recognized by the international community," Ayalon added.

"Unless we choose a totally different approach, this war will continue for generations to come. It will lead to more violence and terror."

Ayalon said Israel is being torn apart by the debate over expansion, adding that American Jews have a responsibility to advocate for the two-state solution and peace with the Palestinians.

“We in Israel ... are in too much pain to see clearly ... We need you by our side on this long and hard road. We need you to tell us the truth as you see it.”

The J Street conference featured leading activists, policymakers and political leaders discussing the future of the US-Israeli relationship, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and American policy in the Middle East.

Speakers included Democratic presidential candidates such as Michael Bennet, Pete Buttigieg, Julian Castro, Amy Klobuchar and Bernie Sanders.

Also scheduled to speak is Arab-Israeli Knesset member Ayman Odeh of the Joint List, which could play a critical role in blocking Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s return to power.



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[Lebanese protesters vent anger at](#)

central bank, clash with security forces

Author:

Tue, 2019-10-29 01:43

BEIRUT: Protests in Lebanon entered their 12th day as security forces clashed with demonstrators blocking main roads in Beirut and routes connecting the capital to other regions.

There were flashpoints across the city as authorities attempted to reopen key highways shut off by protesters in a bid to maintain pressure for political change.

Groups of activists marched on the central bank and branches across Lebanon calling for the resignation of its governor, Riad Salameh, who they hold responsible for the country's financial woes.

The Lebanese banking association decided on Monday to stick with its decision to keep banks shut on Tuesday, marking the longest period of bank closures in the country's financial history.

However, following an exceptional meeting, the association stressed its commitment to "pay out salaries for public sector workers, including security forces," adding that the central bank was "working to secure necessary liquidity for this purpose."

A group of lawyers, sympathetic to the protesters, staged a sit-in outside the Justice Palace in Beirut. MPs from the parliamentary bloc loyal to President Michel Aoun announced lifting bank secrecy on their accounts.

Protesters have accused head of bloc and foreign minister, Gebran Bassil, of corruption and are demanding he stand down along with others.

Member of the Lebanese Parliament, Eddy Maalouf, said: "The decision to lift bank secrecy will include ministers and MPs and the two female deputies of the head of the Free Patriotic Movement, by signing documents at the notary's office, to lift bank secrecy on their accounts in Lebanon and abroad.

"This step marks the beginning of initiatives by the Free Patriotic Movement to reach the adoption of anti-corruption laws, to ensure the accountability of corrupt officials and unveil the truth before the people, instead of the prevailing wave of disinformation, slander and lies."

In an attempt by the authority to prove its seriousness in the implementation of the reform package it had announced earlier, Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri on Monday presided over a meeting of the ministerial council to study the draft general amnesty law.

Following a meeting with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, a delegation from the Aounist parliamentary bloc reiterated "the need to adopt legislative

proposals it had previously presented, related to anti-corruption, accountability and recovery of looted wealth.”

The bloc’s secretary-general, MP Ibrahim Kanaan, said that Berri would “activate the work and ask the parliamentary committees to start studying all proposals and the 2020 draft budget, without any delay.”

Afifa Al-Sayed, veteran activist from the civil society, told Arab News: “The young men and women in the streets are tired, especially as they have not received any prompt response to their demands and that their movement is not organized.

“Security bodies on Monday opened the roads by force, in Sidon in particular. Protesters in the streets are starting to feel that the situation is cooling down. If we give up and leave the streets, they will work on further breaking us.

“This is the revolution and the cause of the youth, and they cannot be told what to do. They are even refusing to be told what to do next. If things stay this way, they might lead to chaos and this might be advantageous since it will make the authority feel uncertain,” she added.

“Meanwhile, some groups are building strategies and ideas for the revolution and are trying to contact other groups protesting on the ground to suggest names that can be trusted to speak in their names. But until then, it is the revolution of the youth, and they decide what they want.”



Lebanese anti-government protesters practice yoga on a blocked avenue in the center of the capital Beirut. (AFP)

Another activist, Randa Al-Yaseer, told Arab News: “More meetings are being

organized to find new ways to protest, especially that people are starting to feel tired, therefore, protests in the streets might be transformed to other activities.

“If I tell protesters something they do not like, they ask me to leave. They say even their parents cannot tell them what do. Some groups are communicating on social media outlets and refuse to reveal their identities. That is their right, since there are fears of getting arrested by the authority and security bodies, which can mean the end of the protests.

“Even the protest squares are being attacked. Some people come at night and steal the chairs and tables we bought with our own money. Some women have been offering water bottles and sandwiches to people in the streets, to discover later that some people were selling the bottles and sandwiches for one dollar,” added Al-Yaseer.

“We cannot say that the movement is failing. People are surprising us. They are showing motivation, but only in the afternoon and at night.”



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Lebanon's closed banks pledge to pay out salaries IMF stresses urgency of reforms in Lebanon to restore economic stability

After Baghdadi, Turkey copes with Daesh threat

Author:

Tue, 2019-10-29 01:35

ANAKARA: After Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's death, the terror group still poses a security threat to regional countries, including Turkey.

Turkey's location on the transit route of foreign fighters on their way to join Daesh poses a serious security risk.

The compound where Al-Baghdadi was killed in a US operation was just a few miles from the Turkish border in a small village called Barisha.

Turkish counterterrorism police detained 20 foreign nationals in Ankara on Monday over suspicions of affiliation with Daesh, as the country fears possible revenge acts by the terror group after US President Donald Trump thanked Turkey for help in killing Al-Baghdadi.

The Daesh-linked suspects, allegedly from Syria, will be referred to the migration office for deportation.

At least 315 people have been killed so far in attacks claimed by Daesh in Turkey, where the terrorist group has targeted civilians, including Arab tourists, in suicide bombings and armed attacks. Some 1,338 others have been wounded in the attacks.

Many metropolitan municipalities, including Ankara – where Daesh carried out a bomb attack, claiming the lives of 107 people – heightened their security measures in public areas ahead of critical dates, such as Oct. 29 for Republic Day celebrations.

Nearly one-third of the 750 Daesh terrorists released by the YPG in Syria have surrendered to Turkey, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar announced on Monday.

For four years, Turkey conducted over 2,000 operations against Daesh and about 1,200 individuals were arrested and convicted over their connections to the terror group.

Michael Horowitz, a Middle East security analyst with the Le Beck consultancy, said Daesh will likely seek to carry out attacks to balance the death of its leader.

"The group did carry out such a wave of 'revenge attacks' following the collapse of its 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria," he told Arab News.

However, Horowitz added that the group will mostly focus on conflict areas including Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan.

Halid Abdurrahman, a researcher and analyst on the Middle East and North

Africa, said that the elimination of Daesh leaders would motivate its fighters for new attacks.

“The fact that Al-Baghdadi was killed in a US operation where Turkey was involved may render Ankara a target and push security forces toward further operations,” he told Arab News.

According to Abdurrahman, Daesh would prefer easy, “soft” targets.

“The fact that Turkey is still present in Syria with its troops would make the country more accessible and a priority for revenge,” he added.

Oubai Shahbandar, a defense analyst, said that intelligence sharing played an important role in providing US special forces a full picture on Al-Baghdadi’s hideout.

“Covert cooperation between the US and regional allies helped make sure that the operation was a success. In particular, the capture of Ismael Al-Ethawi, a key aide and courier for Al-Baghdadi, by Turkish security forces earlier this year played an instrumental role in the operation’s success.

“Daesh terror attacks have afflicted all countries in the region. Continued intelligence sharing and cooperation against this common threat will continue to be crucial,” he added.



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Remains of Daesh leader Al-Baghdadi buried at sea Saudi Arabia hails US raid that killed Al-Baghdadi