

Iraqi education minister resigns over brother's Daesh links

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-30 22:45

BAGHDAD: Iraq's new education minister has resigned over allegations her brother was a leader with Daesh just days after she was handed the post.

The scandal is the latest blow to Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi who has still not completed his Cabinet amid deep divisions between the Parliament's main political blocs over the key positions.

Shaima Khalil Al-Hayali was approved by Parliament last week to head the Education Ministry but had not yet taken the ministerial oath.

She submitted her resignation on Saturday to Abdul Mahdi after intelligence information emerged that her brother was a Daesh leader in Mosul between the summer of 2014, when the extremist group overran the city, and October 2016, when it was liberated by security forces.

Laith Khalil Al-Hayali, was an engineer working for the Nineveh Water Directorate, local security officials in Mosul told Arab News. He was dismissed from his post before 2014 for his association with Daesh, but he was reappointed as a director after 2014 when the militants seized the city.

Websites linked to Daesh published videos showing Laith praising the militants and inciting people to fight the Iraqi military.

The intelligence also said that two of Laith's sons were killed fighting for Daesh during the liberation of Mosul in 2016.

The first was killed in clashes between the militants and security forces, while the second one blew himself up in a bid to halt advancing forces.

The minister did not deny her brother's involvement with Daesh but said he was forced to work with them and that he showed up in the videos under the threat of being shot.

The information is an embarrassment to the leaders of the pro-Iran Al-Binna'a coalition who nominated Al-Hayali.

It was not clear whether the resignation was Al-Hayali's decision alone or whether her backers had ordered her to quit.

Abdul Mahdi was sworn in at the end of October but has faced a series of crises during his short time in the position.

This is not the first time he has presented his preferred candidates for ministerial positions without checking their security and political backgrounds – something that has deepened mistrust between the prime minister

and political parties that could bring down his government.

He is still without without three key ministers – defense, interior and justice amid a dispute between the two main blocs in Parliament over the candidates, lawmakers told Arab News on Sunday.

Reform, led by the influential Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, opposes the candidates nominated by Al-Binna'a for interior and defense. Al-Binna'a is led by Hadi Al-Amiri, commander of the Iran-backed Badr Organization, the most powerful armed faction.

Abdul Mahdi has not commented on Al-Hayali's resignation and not even announced whether he has accepted her letter.

The incident has brought to the forefront allegations against other new ministers. They include Communications Minister Naeim Al-Rubaie, a former senior figure in Saddam Hussein's Baath party. Anyone linked to the organization is banned from involvement in Iraq's government.

"It would be better for Abdul Mahdi to accept her (Al-Hayali's) resignation to save face," a key negotiator from Reform told Arab News.

"We asked him at the first session of Parliament to submit the names of the candidates to the security services to be checked. We also demanded that they be presented to the bodies of integrity and accountability and justice, but our requests were ignored.

"The result is that the government now includes a minister representing Daesh, another one representing Al-Qaeda and a third one representing Baath party."

Iraq has struggled to form a government since an election in May led to two main parliamentary camps, one pro Iran and the other anti. An agreement in September broke the deadlock, with the two coalitions agreeing to try and negotiate a new Cabinet led by Abdul Mahdi.



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Iraqis demand US troop pullout Trump declares end to US 'policeman' role in surprise Iraq visit

[30 children of Russian Daesh militants return home from Iraq](#)

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-30 22:40

BAGHDAD: Thirty Russian children whose mothers are in Iraqi prison for belonging to Daesh left Baghdad on Sunday to return home, a Russian diplomatic source said.

The fathers of the children, young boys and girls between the ages of three and 10, are believed to have been killed in combat during Iraq's three-year war against the militants, the source said.

Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov said earlier this week that he expected the children to arrive in Moscow on Sunday.

He said 24 of them were from Dagestan, and another three were from Chechnya.

Several thousand Russians traveled to join the militants in their once sprawling “caliphate” straddling Syria and Iraq, according to estimates from the Russian security services. Some took their families with them.

Since last year, around 100 women and children – mostly from Russia’s Muslim-majority Caucasus – have returned under a program championed by Kadyrov.

But in mid-November, Chechen activist Kheda Saratova accused Russia’s FSB security service of blocking attempts to bring back the remaining widows and children of Russian Daesh militants.

“According to our organization, there are over 2,000 of them left in Syria and Iraq,” Saratova, who is on Kadyrov’s human rights council, said at the time.

Meanwhile on Sunday Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi held talks in Baghdad with Anna Kuznetsova, the Russian president’s envoy for the rights of children. During the meeting, Abdel Mahdi said a “distinction should be made between humanitarian issues and terrorist crimes,” according to a statement from his office.

“These children are also victims,” he added.

More than 300 people, including around 100 foreigners, have been sentenced to death and many others to life imprisonment in Iraq for joining Daesh, which at its peak controlled nearly a third of the country.

Baghdad declared victory against Daesh in December last year, but the militants maintain sleeper cells and have carried out periodic hit-and-run attacks.



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30 Daesh suspects arrested in Ankara Syria's Assad authorizes Iraqi forces to strike Daesh in Syria

[Tourists throng Egypt pyramids after bombing, but future clouded](#)

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-30 22:33

GIZA: Crowds of tourists stared in awe at the towering pyramids of Giza near Cairo on Saturday undaunted by a nearby bomb attack a day earlier that killed holidaymakers from Vietnam.

A roadside bombing ripped through a tourist bus killing three tourists and an Egyptian guide on Friday, as it traveled near the world-famous attraction.

The attack comes as Egypt's vital tourism sector has begun to recover after years of instability and militant violence that scared visitors away.

"I think terrorism can strike anywhere in the world," Somand Yang from South Korea told AFP.

"You have to be careful but it is also like luck." Security forces guarded the entrance to the sprawling site and Yang, 32, said she had no qualms about visiting.

"Lightning never strikes twice in the same place. So I figured it will be even safer today," she said.

Excited holidaymakers rode camels and queued to enter a tomb as they snapped pictures of the Great Pyramid, the only surviving structure of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Hawkers followed the tourists, doggedly trying to sell trinkets and souvenirs. Despite the steady flow of visitors, Egyptians working at the site said they were shaken by the attack – and concerned that it could hit their livelihoods.

"I knew the guide who died yesterday," said Dalia Sadaka, as she accompanied a group of sightseers.

"I completely broke down yesterday, but I had to get to work in the morning," she said, pointing to her visibly swollen eyes.

Earlier hit hard by a string of bloody attacks and unrest, visitor numbers to Egypt have more recently staged a partial recovery.

In October 2015, a bomb claimed by a local affiliate of Daesh killed all 224 people on board a passenger jet carrying Russian tourists over the Sinai peninsula.

That incident dealt a severe blow to Egypt's tourism industry, which was still reeling from the turmoil set off by the 2011 uprising that forced veteran leader Hosni Mubarak from power.

The official statistics agency says arrivals reached 8.2 million in 2017, up from 5.3 million the year before.

But that figure was still far short of the record influx in 2010 when over 14 million came.

"I fear yesterday's incident may have an impact on our source of income," said an elderly man who offers camel rides, declining to give his name.

"It is very regrettable," he said. "We were finally happy that tourism started picking up a bit."



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Egyptian forces kill 40 suspected militants after tourist bus bombed3 die as roadside bomb targets tourist bus near Pyramids in Egypt

Syria's regime on path to come in from the cold

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-30 22:27

BEIRUT: Almost eight years into Syria's civil war, President Bashar Assad seems closer than ever to securing a comeback at home and in the Arab region, analysts say.

As 2018 ends, the Moscow-backed government in Damascus is in control of nearly two-thirds of Syria, after notching up a string of victories against fighters and militants.

And after a shock announcement by the US this month that it is to pull all 2,000 of its troops out of Syria, the regime also seems on track to regain influence in parts of the country under Kurdish-led control.

On Friday, Damascus sent troops to a northern area near the border with Turkey to stave off a long-threatened Turkish assault on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) there.

It did so at the invitation of the Kurds, who feel exposed by the shock withdrawal announcement by the US, their principal backer.

The Kurds reaching out to the regime represented the latest in a string of achievements for Assad, said Mutlu Civiroglu, an expert in Kurdish affairs.

"He is consolidating his power day by day diplomatically and militarily," he said.

Assad had previously threatened to retake SDF-held oil-rich territory, whether through ongoing talks or by force.

"Rather than fighting with the Kurds, the government is now invited by the Kurds to enter these regions," Civiroglu said.

"There can be nothing better than this for Assad," the analyst added.

Aside from SDF-held northeastern Syria, the opposition-held region of Idlib remains beyond Assad's control, but is subject to a cease-fire deal.

The SDF are battling to expel the last Daesh militants from their eastern holdout near the Iraqi border. But the militants also retain a presence in the country's vast Badia desert.

Kurdish fighters have spearheaded the fight against Daesh in Syria, and the presence of US-led coalition members alongside the SDF in northern Syria had previously deterred Turkey from attacking.

The US announcement last week sparked renewed fears of an assault, after two previous Turkish incursions inside the war-torn country.

But President Donald Trump's pullout order has also sent a message to fellow Arab countries in the region, says Nicholas Heras, an analyst at the Center for a New American Security.

"Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria sent the signal to the Arab states that they need to engage with Assad on their own terms and not wait for US policy to come into focus," he said.

Even before any US troops pull out, a drive to bring Assad back into the Arab fold seems to have picked up momentum in recent weeks.

The United Arab Emirates Embassy in Damascus reopened on Thursday, 10 days after Sudanese President Omar Bashir made the first visit of any Arab leader to the Syrian capital since the start of the war.

Bahrain has announced it will re-open its diplomatic mission.

Syria's war has killed more than 360,000 people and displaced millions since it began with the brutal repression of anti-Assad protests in 2011.

The UN estimates the conflict has cost the country close to \$400 billion (€350 million).

Heras said the president would be seeking deals with wealthy Gulf states to help rebuild.

"Assad will look to build on his success in 2018 by scoring deals with the Arab states, especially the Gulf, to kick start the reconstruction of Syria," he said.

Syria was suspended from the Arab League in November 2011, as the death toll was escalating and several regional powers bet on Assad's demise.

Most Gulf states closed their embassies in 2012.

An Arab diplomat in Beirut who did not want to be named spoke to AFP about an unprecedented Arab "openness toward Damascus."

And a high-ranking Iraqi official has told AFP Baghdad was helping to mediate a restoration of ties between Damascus and Qatar, a country in a bitter feud with its Gulf neighbors.

These efforts come ahead of the next Arab League summit to be held in Tunis in March.

On Jan. 19 and 20, the Arab Economic Summit in Beirut could provide a further opportunity to discuss Syria's possible attendance at the Tunis event.

Several sources say Egypt is playing a key role in efforts toward Assad's comeback on the Arab scene.

On Dec. 22, Syrian intelligence chief Ali Mamluk, a key regime figure, visited Cairo for talks with Egyptian officials.

A Lebanese diplomatic source who asked to remain unnamed told AFP “there is a project to reactivate Syria’s membership” at the Arab League.

“Egypt is supporting it,” this source said.



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Syria’s Assad authorizes Iraqi forces to strike Daesh in SyriaUS commanders want Kurdish fighters in Syria to keep weapons

[30 Daesh suspects arrested in Ankara](#)

Sun, 2018-12-30 22:11

ANKARA: Turkish security forces on Sunday arrested 30 Daesh-linked suspects, all foreign nationals, in the capital Ankara.

The operation’s timing is significant ahead of New Year’s Eve celebrations, as the suspects were allegedly plotting terror attacks.

Meanwhile, authorities in Istanbul have stepped up security precautions in

busy parts of the city, including the iconic Taksim Square, where celebratory gatherings have been banned.

As of Dec. 21, police had conducted more than 1.5 million identity checks in Istanbul, arresting more than 4,000 people on various charges.

A Daesh-linked lone gunman attacked a nightclub in Istanbul on Jan. 1, 2016, killing many foreigners (including Saudis) as well as Turks.

In another development, Australia has stripped a fighter held in Turkey of his citizenship due to his ties to Daesh.

The US announcement of its planned withdrawal from Syria has put Turkey, which Washington expects to wipe out the remnants of Daesh in Syria, at the forefront of the terror group's potential targets.

Major operation

The Turkish military is preparing another major operation against terror groups, including Daesh, in Syria.

FASTFACTS

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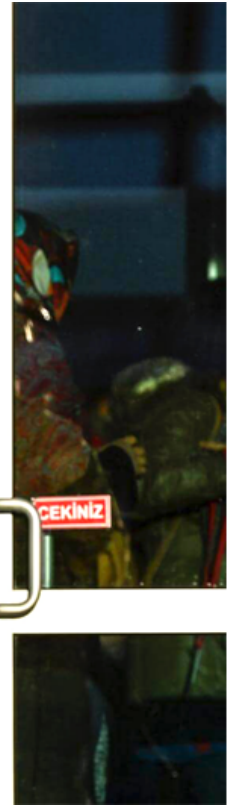
The nightclub attack was a turning point in terms of increased security precautions by Turkish authorities against potential Daesh attacks ahead of New Year's Eve celebrations.

Erol Bural, a former military officer and a terrorism expert at the 21st Century Turkey Institute, said the threat from Daesh has not been eliminated completely.

"Among European countries, Turkey has been hit hardest by Daesh attacks. The terror group decides on its acts in line with regional dynamics," Bural told Arab News.

Experts say the nightclub attack was a turning point in terms of increased security precautions by Turkish authorities against potential attacks by Daesh militants ahead of New Year's Eve celebrations.

"More than 1,100 operations were conducted against Daesh in 2018 throughout the country, and two large Daesh attacks were prevented before they occurred. Security measures were also increased at the border crossings between Turkey and Syria," Bural said.



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Russia, Turkey to coordinate on Syria after US pullout Turkey probes prominent TV anchor