

[Nobel laureate returns to Iraq, pledges to work for peace](#)

Author:

Wed, 2018-12-12 22:37

BAGHDAD: Iraqi activist Nadia Murad met her country's president in Baghdad on Wednesday after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for her advocacy on behalf of victims of wartime sexual violence.

Murad, a member of Iraq's Yazidi minority, was among thousands of women and girls who were captured and forced into sexual slavery by Daesh militants in 2014. She became an activist on behalf of women and girls after escaping and finding refuge in Germany.

She arrived in Baghdad from Stockholm on Wednesday, and was received by President Barham Salih.

"There is no meaning to the Nobel prize without the ongoing work for the sake of peace," Murad told group of community leaders and foreign ambassadors at the presidential palace.

Yazidis are followers of an ancient faith who are falsely branded devil-worshippers by Sunni extremists. When the Daesh group swept into northern Iraq in 2014, the militants massacred thousands of Yazidi men and enslaved an estimated 7,000 women and girls.

Many managed to escape as U.S.-backed Iraqi forces gradually drove the militants from all the territory they once held in a grueling 3-year campaign, but some 3,000 Yazidi women and girls are still missing.

Murad called on the Iraqi government and the US-led coalition to search for the missing. She also called on the government to rebuild her hometown, Sinjar. More than 80 percent of Yazidis are still living in displacement camps.

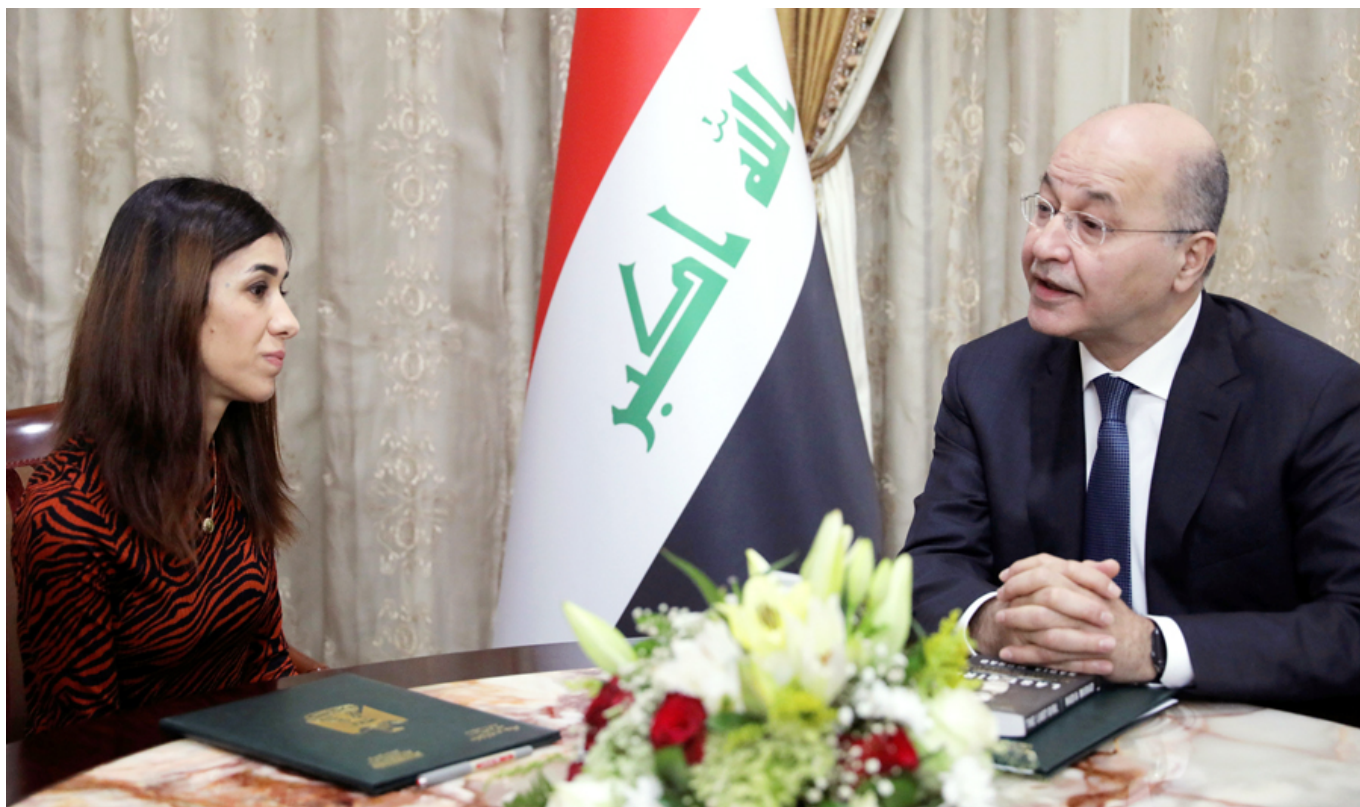
In her Nobel speech on Monday, Murad urged world leaders to put an end to sexual violence, saying "the only prize in the world that can restore our dignity is justice and the prosecution of criminals."

Iraq's president said Murad "embodies the suffering and tragedies Iraqis have gone through in the past and represents the courage and determination to defend rights in the face of the oppressor."

The Yazidis had endured a "heinous and a rare crime in history," Salih said and called on parliament to pass a law recognizing it as a genocide.

Murad later met Hadi al-Amiri and Falih al-Fayadh, top leaders of Iraq's Popular Mobilization militia umbrella, which played a key role in the war against IS. The militias are jointly responsible, with Iraqi federal forces, for the security of Sinjar.

As Murad was receiving her prize in Oslo, Iraq celebrated the anniversary of its costly victory over IS, which still carries out sporadic attacks and controls a remote enclave just across the border in Syria. The war left tens of thousands dead, and destroyed entire neighborhoods and towns. Some 1.8 million people are still displaced from their homes.



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'Let hope unite us,' Nadia Murad says in UAE in her first appearance as a Nobel laureate
Congolesse Denis Mukwege, Iraq's Nadia Murad win 2018 Nobel Peace Prize

[Syrian state seizes opponents' property, rights activists say](#)

Author:

Wed, 2018-12-12 22:11

BEIRUT: Syria's government has been using a little-known anti-terrorism law to seize property from dissidents and their families as it takes back control of areas that were held by rebel groups, rights groups and some of the people affected say.

With Syria's conflict stabilized, at least for now, and President Bashar Assad back in control of the biggest cities, there is an increasing focus on how he will handle the areas where the 2011 uprising against him flared.

International attention has focused on policies, such as legislation known as Law 10, that could eventually enable the government to dispossess people in the opposition strongholds worst damaged in the war.

But while Law 10 has not yet been put into effect, the separate anti-terrorism law has already been used to seize property, including from people who had no hand in violence, according to human rights groups.

One man, an architect who joined street protests against Assad early in the uprising, and posted anti-government material online, lost his house, office and farmland in Ghouta in southwestern Syria as well as his car, he said. "I built my house brick by brick. I built it with my bare hands, tended to every corner and to every inch," the architect said. He now lives in the northwestern province of Idlib after fleeing with many other Ghouta residents after its surrender in April.

As they stand to lose property permanently, and because in many cases they have family members still living under government control, none of the six people who spoke to Reuters after being named in seizure orders wanted to be identified.

Lists circulating online – which rights groups believe to be accurate – show that hundreds of such orders have been made, affecting potentially thousands of people.

Seizure

The architect first knew a government security order had targeted him when the Architects and Engineers Syndicate terminated his membership because of a security order and canceled his pension.

He had joined the protests against Assad early on, but said he never took up arms or played a role in local government in his area of eastern Ghouta, which the army recaptured in April.

In 2016, he tried to sell his car. "The broker in Damascus told me that a seizure for security had been imposed on all the properties owned by me, my partners, my wife and children," he said via a messaging app.

The family needed money, so he sold the car for parts for 190,000 Syrian pounds – about \$580 at that time.

When they left for Idlib along with thousands of others as part of a surrender deal with the government covering eastern Ghouta, the family had to abandon their family home, an office and farm land that is now all forfeit to the state.

"It is hard to describe a house you lived in your whole life and land you planted with trees that you watched grow. I miss the doors, windows and even the doorstep," the architect's son said.

Uprising

About a year into the uprising, Assad updated Syria's anti-terrorism laws, issuing a decree to give courts the power to impose "security seizure" orders against individuals.

Initially, assets are frozen under these orders, preventing owners from selling, or using them commercially. When the seizures are executed, the state will sell the assets by auction.

A doctor from the eastern Ghouta town of Douma who left in April and now lives in Turkey said his house, land, clinic and car had been seized.

"The Syrian regime has labelled all the opposition activists as terrorists,

tried them in absentia and seized their properties," he said.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said orders to freeze assets were among numerous laws the Syrian government used to punish political dissidents and opponents. Damascus denies targeting peaceful dissidents with its anti-terrorism laws, or unlawfully dispossessing people. The government did not respond to a Reuters request for further comment.

HRW said it could not verify lists of people affected by the court orders that are circulating online, or the scale of the property freezes. But it said it had confirmed several cases of people whose names it found on one such list.

Two Syrian rights groups, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, said they had verified numerous cases. The network said it had registered at least 327 individuals targeted by property seizures from 2014 to 2018. The observatory said it had registered 93 cases of property seizures targeting opposition activists. It was aware of many other cases, but was not able to verify them because those involved were too scared to speak freely, it said.

Fear

Those affected, already fearing for their lives if they return after being branded terrorists, also face a loss of property that could discourage family members from going home.

"They left the people whose property they seized with nothing to return to, not even hope," said the architect, who now lives in rebel-held Idlib province with his family.

Paradoxically, it is often the people who left eastern Ghouta who are in most need of the property they left behind. One man left eastern Ghouta for Idlib and now lives in poverty far from home.

He cannot find work there and wants to pay smugglers to cross the border into Turkey. But his once rich parents, who stayed in eastern Ghouta, cannot raise the money by selling or renting land because their assets have been frozen. They found out about the court order before the government retook eastern Ghouta in April.

"My parents are now guests in their own home. The house they have lived in for their whole lives is now put under seizure by the government because we were opposition activists," he said.



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Hundreds of bodies found in mass graves near Syria ex-Daesh bastion
Erdogan threatens to launch military operation against Syria Kurd militia 'within days'

[New Commander for Operation Sovereign Borders](#)

Major General Craig Furini AM, CSC, will take over as the new Commander of Operation Sovereign Borders this week.

[Normalcy restored in Egyptian Sinai city, but danger lurks](#)

Author:

Tue, 2018-12-11 22:18

EL-ARISH, Egypt: Mohammed Amer Shaaban stood over trays of fresh fish at his tiny store in the coastal Sinai Peninsula city of El-Arish, pointing to his right and left while recalling the tough days when Daesh militants operated with impunity.

"They killed a Christian who owns a knife shop there and an informant over there. They also killed one of my cousins," he said.

"We have enjoyed some stability and peace for the past six or seven months," added the 48-year-old father of five as some two dozen journalists descended on El-Arish's fish market as part of a rare, army-organized trip.

The trip was chiefly designed to show off signs of normalcy in El-Arish, northern Sinai's largest city, as evidence that the military's all-out offensive against militants launched nearly 10 months ago has succeeded. But in the city and the surrounding deserts, the signs of war are difficult to miss, particularly the enormous security presence. The Associated Press was required to submit the photos and video accompanying this story to Egypt's military censor, which did not say two weeks after submission if or when the material would be released.

The carefully scripted trip included visits to an indoor arena packed with thousands of screaming schoolchildren, a new housing project, a school and a factory. No one is claiming the militants have been defeated, but there have been no major attacks for several months, save a recent ambush of buses carrying Christian pilgrims to a remote desert monastery south of Cairo that left seven dead.

The fight against militants in Sinai has gone on for years, but the insurgency gathered steam after the 2013 ouster by the military of a freely elected but divisive president, the Islamist Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Authorities have since shut down almost all underground tunnels that they suspected militants used to smuggle fighters and weapons into Sinai from neighboring Gaza, ruled by the Islamist Hamas group since 2007. They also razed to the ground much of the town of Rafah on the Gaza border in a bid to deny the militants a safe haven and stop its use as cover for tunnels. Elsewhere in northern Sinai, olive orchards have been bulldozed to deny the militants sanctuary.

A brutal militant attack on a Sinai mosque that killed more than 300 worshippers a year ago – the deadliest such attack in Egypt in living memory – prompted general-turned-president Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi to order a major offensive.

The operation, with thousands of troops backed by tanks, jet-fighters and warships, got underway in February. Security forces almost completely sealed off northern Sinai, causing shortages of food and fuel. The siege was eased in May, allowing normalcy to gradually return to the mostly desert region, especially in El-Arish.

Barely a year ago, militants in El-Arish killed suspected informants in broad daylight, set up bogus checkpoints, shot Christians in their stores, snatched clerics and members of the security forces to later dump their bodies on the streets. Now traffic is heavy, families are out in public, stores are filled with goods, and school classes are packed with children.

The military is eager to tout the changes.

"Terrorism will be completely defeated in a matter of a few months," announced Mohammed Abdel-Fadeel Shoushah, a retired general who serves as the governor of northern Sinai. "Now we are focusing on development, which is the

basis of security.”

For now, though, El-Arish shows enduring signs of conflict.

A Pharaonic-style building across the road from the governor’s heavily guarded office has almost every one of its windows shattered. Some streets are blocked by sand berms, while others are sealed off by concrete blocks. Unfinished buildings are everywhere in the city, parts of which look deserted. Many of the date palms in the city look like they have received little care for years.

Authorities are building a wall around the city’s airport after militants last December rocketed a helicopter used by the then defense and interior ministers while parked on the tarmac. The ministers were unharmed, but one officer was killed in the attack.

Another wall with heavily fortified watch towers is being built on the southern reaches of the city to prevent militants from infiltrating through dense olive orchards.

The pervasive security, and the great lengths to which the military went to protect the journalists, suggest danger may not be far away. The reporters traveled in armored cars with gunners in full combat gear perched atop, and a signal-jamming vehicle tagged along as a precaution against roadside bombs. The top officials in the convoy were protected by heavily armed policemen in black fatigues and ski masks.

In late October, militants twice attacked workers employed by the company building the wall just south of El-Arish, killing at least six and wounding 16. Earlier in November, security forces killed 12 militants hiding in unused buildings in El-Arish.

“Stay put in the vehicle and don’t come out and wander around,” an armed plainclothes police officer sternly warned reporters during one stop. “It is not as safe as you might think,” he said, pointing to the expanse of desert on one side of the road.

The magnitude of the counterterrorism task becomes apparent during the nearly 200-kilometer (125-mile) journey through the desert from the east bank of the Suez Canal to El-Arish.

All along the road are military positions. At some, tanks are buried in the sand for protection with only their turrets showing. Soldiers on watch towers in the middle of nowhere cut forlorn figures against a backdrop of desert. The checkpoints create long lines of vehicles. Helicopters occasionally hover above.

El-Arish resident Hassan Mahdi, a lawyer who came to Sinai from a Nile Delta province as a young boy nearly 30 years ago, said the restored security is a welcome change.

“To be honest, life was very, very difficult here,” he said. “Businesses were relocating out of Sinai in search of security and many things were in short supply. Not anymore.”



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Life returns to Egypt's Sinai city despite anti-militant war
Egyptian police kill 12 militants in Sinai raid

[Australian government discusses moving Israel embassy to Jerusalem](#)

Author:

Tue, 2018-12-11 22:05

SYDNEY: Australia's government met on Tuesday to discuss whether to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, two sources familiar with the matter said, a decision that would break with decades of policy and risk angering Asian neighbours.

"Cabinet met today and the issue of moving the Israeli embassy was discussed. The decision is still pending," said one of the sources who declined to be identified as he is not authorised to speak to the media.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison in October said he was "open" to moving the

embassy to Jerusalem, following the lead of U.S. President Donald Trump. The United States opened a new embassy in Jerusalem in May, a move that delighted Israel, infuriated Palestinians and upset the wider Arab world and Western allies.

The Australian newspaper reported several senior cabinet members were leaning towards recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital while stopping short of moving the embassy.

Jerusalem's status is a major obstacle to a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel regards all of the city, including the eastern sector that it annexed after a 1967 war, as its capital.

The Australian newspaper said a decision could be announced this week.

By recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Morrison would be hoping to keep his conservative backbench happy but it would likely anger neighbours, including Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority country.

The Palestinian question is sensitive in Indonesia and it has refused to sign a free trade agreement with Australia until it confirms its plans towards Israel.

Israel's government regards Jerusalem as the eternal and indivisible capital of the country. Palestinians feel equally strongly, saying that East Jerusalem must be the capital of a future Palestinian state.



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Trump rejects moving Israel embassy to Jerusalem – for now Israel,

Palestinians jockey over Jerusalem in Trump era