

Iraqi activist's killing sparks protests against impunity

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Sun, 2021-05-09 11:13

KARBALA: A leading Iraqi anti-government activist was killed early Sunday, security sources and activists said, sending supporters of a protest movement onto the streets to demand an end to bloodshed.

Ihab Al-Wazni, a coordinator of protests in the Shiite shrine city of Karbala, was a vocal opponent of corruption, the stranglehold of Tehran-linked armed groups and Iran's influence in Iraq.

He was shot overnight outside his home by men on motorbikes, in an ambush caught on surveillance cameras. His death was confirmed by security forces and activists.

Wazni narrowly escaped death in December 2019, when men on motorbikes used silenced weapons to kill fellow activist Fahem Al-Tai as he was dropping him home in Karbala, where pro-Tehran armed groups are legion.

Both were key figures in a national protest movement that erupted against government corruption and incompetence in Iraq in October 2019.

Around 600 people were killed as a result of their association with that movement – many on the streets during rallies, others targeted on their doorsteps away from the rallies.

Protests broke out in Karbala, Nassiriya and Diwaniya in southern Iraq in reaction to Wazni's killing, as people called for an end to the bloodshed and to rampant corruption.

In a video recording in the morgue where his body was initially held, a fellow activist made it clear who he and colleagues blamed for the killing. "It is the Iranian militias who killed Ihab," said the unnamed activist. "They are going to kill all of us! They threaten us and the government remains silent."

Police in Karbala said they "will spare no effort" to find "the terrorists" behind Wazni's killing.

Politicians, including Shiite leader Ammar Al-Haki, deplored the killing and called for justice.

Around 30 activists have died in targeted killings and dozens of others abducted, some detained briefly, since October 2019.

Such targeted killings are normally carried out in the dead of night by men on motorbikes, and nobody claims responsibility.

Activists and the UN repeatedly blame "militias."

Authorities have consistently failed to identify the perpetrators of these political killings.

Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi took office a year ago, vowing to rein in rogue factions, fight corruption and roll out long-awaited reforms after years of war and insurgency.

Pro-Iran groups view the premier as being too close to Washington and

protesters believe he has failed to deliver on his promises.

“Such crimes against activists in Iraq raise again the question about the real steps of the government regarding accountability for... (those) responsible for crimes” targeting protesters, Ali Bayati, a member of Iraq’s Human Rights Commission, tweeted Sunday.

Wazni had himself challenged Kadhemi in a Facebook post in February, asking rhetorically: “Do you know what is going on? You know that they kidnap and kill – or you live in another country?”



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Drone attack on Iraqi base hosting US troopsIraq seeks Italian refund for military purchases

US Navy seizes weapons in Arabian Sea 'destined for Yemen from Iran'

Author:

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Sun, 2021-05-09 09:31

DUBAI: The US Navy announced Sunday it seized an arms shipment of thousands of assault weapons, machine guns and sniper rifles hidden aboard a ship in the Arabian Sea, apparently bound for Yemen to support the country's Houthi rebels.

An American defense official told The Associated Press that the Navy's initial investigation found the vessel came from Iran, again tying the Islamic Republic to arming the Houthis despite a United Nations arms embargo. Iran's mission to the UN did not immediately respond to a request for comment, though Tehran has denied in the past giving the rebels weapons.

Laid out on the deck of [@USSMonterey](#)

Cache of seized weapons included: dozens of advanced Russian-made anti-tank guided missiles; 1000s of Chinese Type 56 assault rifles; 100s of PKM machine guns, sniper rifles & rocket-propelled grenades launchers. Plus advanced optical sights pic.twitter.com/U00EB74XEf

– U.S. 5th Fleet (@US5thFleet) [May 8, 2021](#)

The seizure, one of several amid the yearslong war in Yemen, comes as the US

and others try to end a conflict that spawned one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. The arms shipment, described as sizeable, shows that the war may still have far to run.

The guided-missile cruiser USS Monterey discovered the weapons aboard what the Navy described as a stateless dhow, a traditional Mideast sailing ship, in an operation that began Thursday in the northern reaches of the Arabian Sea off Oman and Pakistan. Sailors boarded the vessel and found the weapons, most wrapped in green plastic, below deck.

When laid out on the deck of the Monterey, the scale of the find came into focus. Sailors found nearly 3,000 Chinese Type 56 assault rifles, a variant of the Kalashnikov. They recovered hundreds of other heavy machine guns and sniper rifles, as well as dozens of advanced, Russian-made anti-tank guided missiles. The shipments also included several hundred rocket-propelled grenade launchers and optical sights for weapons.

For 36hrs [@USSMonterey](#) provided over watch & security for its [@USCG](#) boarding teams & the interdicted dhow throughout the 2day operation [@USNavy](#) conducts routine patrols in international waters to disrupt transport of illicit cargo that often funds terrorism & unlawful activity pic.twitter.com/hWa7PTbEhB

– U.S. 5th Fleet (@US5thFleet) [May 9, 2021](#)

The Navy's Mideast-based 5th Fleet did not identify where the weapons originated, nor where they were going. However, an American defense official said the weapons resembled those of other shipments interdicted bounded for the Houthis.

Based on interviews with the crew and material investigated on board, the

sailors determined the vessel came from Iran, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing investigation. "After all illicit cargo was removed, the dhow was assessed for seaworthiness, and after questioning, its crew was provided food and water before being released," the 5th Fleet said in a statement. The seizure marks just the latest in the Arabian Sea or Gulf of Aden involving weapons likely bound to Yemen. The seizures began in 2016 and have continued intermittently throughout the war, which has seen the Houthis fire ballistic missiles and use drones later linked to Iran. Yemen is awash with small arms that have been smuggled into poorly controlled ports over years of conflict.



The weapons were seized from a dhow in the Arabian Sea. (US Navy)

This recent seizure appeared to be among the biggest. Tim Michetti, an investigative researcher who studies the illicit weapon trade, also said the shipment bore similarities to the others.

"The unique blend of materiel recovered by the USS Monterey appears to be consistent with the materiel from previous interdictions, which have been linked to Iran," he said.

Yemen's war began in September 2014, when the Houthis seized Sanaa and began a march south to try to seize the entire country. Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates and other countries, entered the war alongside Yemen's internationally recognized government in March 2015. Iran backed the Houthis, who harass Saudi Arabia with missile fire and drone attacks. Since 2015, the UN Security Council has imposed an arms embargo on the Houthis. Despite that, UN experts warn "an increasing body of evidence

suggests that individuals or entities in the Islamic Republic of Iran supply significant volumes of weapons and components to the Houthis.”



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Over 600 Europe-bound migrants returned to Libya: navyUS Navy fires warning shots in new tense encounter with Iran

[Israeli violence against Al-Aqsa worshippers condemned](#)

Sat, 2021-05-08 21:23

JERUSALEM: Israel braced for more protests on Saturday after clashes at

Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa Mosque compound left more than 200 people injured.

The unrest followed Friday prayers when Israeli riot police fired rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades at Palestinians as violence erupted outside Islam's third holiest site.

At least three people were seriously injured when Israeli troops used rubber bullets to disperse worshippers at the UNESCO world heritage site.

Israeli forces stormed the mosque's plaza and fired sound grenades inside the building, where throngs of worshippers, including women and children, were praying on the last Friday of Ramadan.

The clashes came amid soaring tensions over Israeli restrictions on access to parts of the old city during Ramadan and the threat of eviction hanging over four Palestinian families in East Jerusalem to make way for Jewish settlers.

The Israeli violence drew worldwide condemnation.

Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement that the Kingdom "rejects Israel's plans and measures to evict dozens of Palestinians from their homes in Jerusalem and impose Israeli sovereignty over them."

The UAE "strongly condemned" the clashes and potential evictions, and a statement by Khalifa Al-Marar, the foreign affairs minister, urged Israeli authorities to reduce tensions.

The UAE stresses the need for Israeli authorities to assume their responsibilities in line with international law to provide protection to Palestinian citizens, a statement carried by state news agency WAM said.

Wasfi Kailani, executive director of the Hashemite Fund for the reconstruction of Al-Aqsa Mosque, told Arab News that there was no excuse for the Israeli action.

"What happened on Friday night is inexcusable. Violating the mosque's sanctity during the last 10 holy days of Ramadan is illegal and a clear violation of the right to worship. Its status quo must be protected."

Kailani, a member of the Jerusalem Waqf Council, said Israeli forces not only violated the peace of worshippers but also destroyed mosque property, including its clinic and gates.

Hijazi Rishq, head of the Jerusalem Merchants Committee, told Arab News that attacks by Israeli forces were meant to intimidate Palestinians following threats by Jewish extremists of a large-scale infiltration into Al-Aqsa on what they call Jerusalem Day.

"However, the people of Jerusalem have broken the barrier of fear and are no longer afraid of Israeli soldiers or Israeli prisons," he said.

Rishq called on Arab and Islamic countries to help Palestinians defend the

mosque.

The late-night clashes in the old city of Jerusalem followed days of tension in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, where Israelis are trying to evict an entire Palestinian community and hand over their properties to ultra-extreme Jewish settlers.

The Waqf Council, Jordan, the US, EU, and European and Arab countries issued statements denouncing the violence in the city.

The US called on all parties to avoid actions that could damage final status talks between Israel and Palestinians, including settlements.

The UN Security Council Resolution 2334 considers all settlements, including those in Jerusalem, illegal.

Israeli police issued a statement saying officers were attacked with stones and firecrackers and had to restore order.

A police statement claimed that 17 officers were injured, with at least half requiring further attention.

Palestinian citizens of Israel traveled in at least six buses to show their support for worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque, but were barred entry near the village of Abu Ghish.

After they disembarked and began to walk the remaining 20 km distance to the site, local residents came to pick them up in private cars.



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Saudi Arabia, UAE reject Israeli measures to evacuate Palestinian homes in Jerusalem
Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood eviction appeal delayed

[US slams Houthis for boycotting UN Yemen envoy, not stopping Marib offensive](#)

Sat, 2021-05-08 21:14

AL-MUKALLA: The US has criticized the Iran-backed Houthis for refusing to meet UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths in the Omani capital and spurning calls to stop their deadly offensive against Yemen's central city of Marib.

"The Houthis passed up a major opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to peace and to make progress on this proposal by refusing to meet with UN special envoy Griffiths in Muscat," the US State Department said in a statement, adding that the Houthis contradicted their commitments to comply with the available "fair deal" to end the worsening humanitarian crisis by escalating their offensive on Marib.

The US government said that the internationally recognized government of Yemen had expressed willingness to find an agreement to end the war.

Last week, officials said that Houthi chief negotiator Mohammed Abdul-Salam refused to meet the UN envoy to discuss his ideas for ending the war, and he also demanded a halt to Arab coalition airstrikes, unregulated flights in and out of Sanaa airport and an end to restrictions on Hodeidah seaport before agreeing to put into place a nationwide truce.

The Yemeni government said it was willing to engage in direct talks with the Houthis on ending the war.

Abdullah Al-Alimi, the Yemeni president's chief of staff, told a gathering of foreign reporters at an online press conference on Friday that the Yemeni government did not take part in the stalled round of negotiations in Muscat since Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his government have already agreed to the terms of the UN-brokered Joint Declaration.

Regarding the Houthi offensive on the city of Marib, Al-Alimi said the battle is a matter of death and life for millions of Yemenis to prevent the country

from becoming another model of Iran's theocracy.

The Yemeni official told reporters that roughly 2,400 loyalists have been killed and 5,000 more wounded in the fighting in Marib since earlier this year and the Houthis have fired 93 missiles and 360 shells at government-controlled areas during the past five months.

In Marib, heavy fighting broke out on Friday night when government troops repelled two consecutive attacks by the Houthis in Al-Mashjah and Serwah near Marib city, a local army official told Arab News on Saturday.

The clashes ended on Saturday morning after the Houthis retreated after suffering heavy casualties and losing many military vehicles.

In the northern province of Jouf, Yemen's army announced on Friday that it had liberated areas in Al-Alem after heavy clashes with the Houthis.

In the western province of Hodeidah, a mother and her two children were killed and five others were wounded when their vehicle hit an IED planted by the Houthis on the main road between Durihimi and Bayt Al-Faqih, local media said on Saturday.



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Houthis to force virginity test on abducted Yemeni model, says Amnesty International
Yemen PM allocates \$7.9 million to fix damage caused by floods

disaster

Turkey COVID cases below 20,000 for first time since mid-March

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Sat, 2021-05-08 21:07

ANKARA: Turkey's daily COVID-19 cases fell below 20,000 for the first time since March 17 on Saturday, with 18,052 infections over the last 24 hours, health ministry data showed.

Last week, President Tayyip Erdogan announced what he called a "full lockdown" until May 17 to curb a surge in infections and deaths after the country eased restrictions in early March.

The data showed another 281 deaths from the coronavirus on Saturday, raising the total toll to 42,746. Total cases exceeded 5 million, although there has been a fall in infections since the lockdown.

In recent weeks, Turkey has ranked fourth globally in terms of COVID-19 cases, with daily infections topping 60,000.

However, Erdogan said earlier on Saturday that he hoped a "new normalization" period would begin after May 17, adding that reopening schools would be included in steps to be announced after the lockdown.

"There is a serious fall in death numbers now. This shows the measures we took are paying off," Erdogan said.

Despite the recent fall in infections, Turkey on Friday was placed on the UK government's travel red list, a move that threw the status of the Champions League final on May 29 and the Formula One Turkish Grand Prix on June 11-13 – both to be held in Istanbul – into doubt.

The pandemic has also hurt Turkey's tourism revenues, which plunged by two-thirds to \$12 billion last year.



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Travel companies using Turkey to dodge UK quarantine rules