

# Kurdish leader blames Baghdad over wages as protests rage

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By SAMYA KULLAB | AP

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1607543875943766900

Wed, 2020-12-09 18:06

BAGHDAD: The prime minister of Iraq's northern Kurdish-run region on Wednesday blamed the federal government in Baghdad for delaying crucial budget transfers as violent protests over salary payments left eight dead in the past week.

Also on Wednesday, two explosions targeted an oil field in northern Kirkuk province in what the Oil Ministry called a terrorist attack. No casualties were immediately reported in the blasts. The area is disputed between Baghdad and the Kurdish region, and Daesh militants routinely exploit security gaps there.

Karim Hattab, the undersecretary for extraction at the ministry, said two wells were targeted in the Khabbaz oil field and caused a fire. Firefighting teams from state-run North Oil Company and security forces were dispatched to the scene, the ministry added. The field produces 2,000 barrels per day.

In the province of Sulimaniyah in recent days, hundreds have been protesting in multiple towns against two main Kurdish political blocs over public salary payment delays and perceived corruption. Iraq's semi-official High Commission for Human Rights says a total of eight protesters were killed in the areas of Chamchamal, Kefri Darbendikan, Khormal and Saidsadiq. Demonstrators burned down party headquarters and other public offices.

Masrour Barzani, prime minister of the semi-autonomous Kurdish-controlled region, said the right to peaceful protest was "vital" and condemned the violence as "unacceptable," in a statement.

"It is our shared responsibility to maintain the safety and security of everyone, including protesters and public and private property," he said. The protests are largely driven by angry unemployed youth and public sector workers who have not been paid because of a severe fiscal crisis. The Kurdish administration has only paid four months of wages since the start of 2020, and has deducted 21% from the monthly pay to public workers.

Barzani's statement blamed the federal government, saying it has not made budget transfers needed to make wage payments.

"For many months now we have worked hard to reach a fair constitutional settlement with the federal government," he said. "We have not left any excuses for Baghdad to fail to deliver it's obligations to Kurdistan."

Previous governments in Baghdad have withheld budget allocations to the Kurdish region as punishment for its independent oil export policy. Apart from the federal transfers, the region's oil exports are its main source of revenue. Under a new agreement inked earlier this year, the Kurdish region was to receive a share of the state budget, in exchange for half its customs revenues.

The federal government, meanwhile, has been crippled by a severe liquidity

crisis in the wake of spiraling oil prices that have slashed state coffers. Iraqi lawmakers passed a second emergency internal borrowing bill last month, enabling Baghdad to access \$10 billion indirectly from the country's foreign currency reserves.

But the law's adoption sparked a political crisis between Baghdad and Irbil, where the Kurdish regional government is based. Kurdish lawmakers nearly boycotted the vote after some of the other lawmakers sought to halt allocations to the northern region's administration.

"We have shown our willingness in practice to work with the budget deficit law despite reservations on its content and the way in which it was passed," Barzani said. "We expect reciprocal steps from Baghdad to reach and implement an agreement."

The UN on Tuesday condemned the violence in Sulimaniyah, calling for an investigation and urging Kurdish leaders to "safeguard the freedoms of assembly and expression."



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Iraqis slowly rebuild Mosul, with little aid from governmentSix protesters killed amid unrest in Iraq's Kurdistan region

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## Netanyahu rival breaks from Israel's Likud to challenge premier

Thu, 2020-12-10 02:00

JERUSALEM: A leading rival of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the right-wing Likud party announced his resignation from parliament on Wednesday as he launches a new party to challenge the premier.

Gideon Saar, an influential figure in conservative Israeli politics, had challenged Netanyahu in a Likud leadership race in December but decisively lost the primary.

With a Netanyahu-led coalition edging toward collapse, risking a fourth Israeli election in less than two years, Saar announced his break with Likud. "I will create a new movement with the goal of replacing Netanyahu," Saar said in a virtual press conference late on Tuesday.

In a statement on Wednesday, Saar announced his formal resignation from Israel's parliament, the Knesset, freeing him to embark on his "candidacy for prime minister."

It is not yet clear if Israelis will again head to the polls in 2021. Netanyahu's key coalition partner, Defense Minister Benny Gantz, in a preliminary vote last week backed an opposition proposal to dissolve the Knesset.

Gantz charges that Netanyahu has acted only in his own political self-interest and placed his upcoming corruption trial above the needs of ordinary Israelis.

Under the coalition agreement, Gantz – who is also the alternate prime minister – is to take over as premier in November 2021.

Gantz has said that the only way for Netanyahu to avoid another election is to agree on a 2021 budget. Netanyahu's critics say the veteran leader is refusing to agree on a 2021 budget to ensure the government collapses before he has to hand power to Gantz.

Saar, who is seen as close to ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties, is a former Netanyahu loyalist who served in his previous governments.

On several key issues, he stands to the right of Netanyahu, who has been in power since 2009.

Saar backs Israeli annexation of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, a move Netanyahu agreed to freeze in exchange for diplomatic normalization deals with the UAE and Bahrain.

Leading political columnist Ben Caspit, writing in the Ma'ariv newspaper, said there was "fully justified" panic within Netanyahu's ranks over Saar's defection.

Saar will be well positioned to peel votes away from Likud in an upcoming election, Caspit argued.

"Saar is offering the right-wingers who are fed up with Netanyahu an alternative for whom they'll have an easier time voting," he wrote.



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Netanyahu: Israel's vaccination campaign to begin Dec. 27  
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## [Algeria PM slams reported ransoms to 'terror groups'](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-09 01:40

ALGIERS: Algeria's prime minister has sounded the alarm over reported ransoms paid to "terrorist groups" for the freeing of hostages, weeks after the liberation of a French aid worker in Mali.

"Algeria notes, with great concern, continued transfers to terrorist groups of huge sums of money as ransoms to free hostages," Abdelaziz Djerad told African leaders at a summit of African Union heads of government.

This approach "undermines our counterterrorism efforts," he said, quoted by Algerian media.

His comments came after Mali released some 200 prisoners in October ahead of the release of four hostages including French aid worker Sophie Petronin. One of the released prisoners, a terror suspect later arrested in Algeria, said in a video broadcast on Algerian TV that France had been involved in talks with Bamako and a key Malian extremist leader linked with Al-Qaeda.

Mustapha Derrar said he had heard that 207 prisoners would be released along with the payment of a ransom, adding that he had heard the figures €10 million and €30 million.

It was not possible to verify his claims or the conditions under which he made the statement.

In November, Algeria's defense minister said a "large ransom" had been paid to "terrorist groups in exchange for the release of three hostages," adding that such payments violated UN resolutions.

Djerad on Monday called for "concerted action to eradicate violent extremism, combat terrorism and dry up the sources of its funding."

France has consistently denied involvement in negotiations for the release of the hostages or having paid a ransom for Petronin's freedom.

On Oct. 12, French Prime Minister Jean Castex said the terrorists' release of Petronin was a "humanitarian gesture," saying "we were not part of these negotiations."

Rumors of ransoms paid for the release of western hostages in the Sahel region are common but rarely confirmed.

Djerad's statement comes amid Algeria's latest diplomatic fallout with its former colonial occupier, which has said it is considering reducing the number of visas it grants to countries that refuse to take back nationals illegally in the country or suspected of being radicalized.



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French minister in Algeria praises 'cooperation' against extremism

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# Houthis face 'torture' claims over refusal to treat journalist

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-09 00:03

AL-MUKALLA: Local and international right groups have joined Yemeni officials in accusing the Iran-backed Houthis of putting the life of an abducted journalist at risk by denying him lifesaving medication.

Amnesty International said on Monday that Tawfiq Al-Mansouri, a Yemeni reporter abducted in Sanaa along with nine other journalists in 2015, is facing worsening health problems because the militia refuses to provide him with essential treatment.

Lynn Maalouf, the global rights group's deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, described the denial of urgent medical aid for Al-Mansouri as "an act of cruelty that violates (international) bans on torture and other ill-treatment."

She said that the journalist is suffering from diabetes, kidney failure, heart problems, prostate inflammation and asthma.

"More recently we received worrying information that he contracted COVID-19 in June, and that since October his health has further deteriorated since he is being denied crucial treatment for his heart problems," Maalouf said.

Al-Mansouri was one of four journalists sentenced to death by a Houthi-controlled court in Sanaa in June following accusations of colluding with the Arab coalition and Yemen's internationally recognized government.

Five journalists were released during the latest major prisoner swap between the rebels and the government in October

Amnesty International demanded the Houthis provide Al-Mansouri with the necessary drugs and treatment, overturn his death sentence and release him.

Abductees' Mothers Association, a Yemeni rights group that advocates for releasing war prisoners, said in a statement that the Houthis are also refusing to allow Al-Mansouri's family to visit him.

Family members told the organization that he had contracted new diseases in detention and his health is deteriorating.

In the central province of Marib, the five journalists freed by the Houthis said that conditions endured by their four colleagues are growing worse as their captors subject them to intensifying psychological and physical torture.

The journalists urged the international community to pressure the Houthis to release the four prisoners.

In a letter to Maeen Sharim, deputy UN envoy to Yemen, the head of the Yemeni government delegation in prisoner swap talks, Hadi Al-Haej, said that the Houthis risk killing the Yemeni journalist by depriving him of vital drugs and preventing his family from visiting him.

Al-Haej urged the UN Yemen envoy's office to push for the release of the abducted journalists.

Western envoys to Yemen also joined in calls for the journalists to be freed.

"We call for the urgent release of journalist Tawfiq Al-Mansouri in view of a deteriorating health condition that is threatening his life" the British ambassador to Yemen, Michael Aron, said last week.

The Yemeni government said that the Houthis should be punished for aggravating the suffering of Yemenis and carrying out human rights abuses against their opponents by designating them as a terrorist organization.

Yemen's Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar on Sunday hailed US moves to label the Houthis as a terrorist organization.

He urged David Shanker, the US Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East, to accelerate the process in response to "public, political and legal demands" for the Houthis to be punished.



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US announces terror sanctions against Iran's 'ambassador' to Houthis in

## [Anti-tank missile in Libya looks like Iran-produced weapon – UN](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1607460536766638400

Tue, 2020-12-08 19:09

NEW YORK: A United Nations analysis of photos of four anti-tank guided missiles in Libya found that one “had characteristics consistent with the Iranian-produced Dehlavieh” missile, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reported to the Security Council.

However, he said in his biannual report – submitted to the council late Monday – that the UN secretariat was “unable to ascertain if this anti-tank guided missile had been transferred to Libya” in violation of Security Council sanctions on Iran.

The 15-member council banned weapons exports by Iran in 2007. Under a 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and key global powers, which is enshrined in a Security Council resolution, the arms restrictions were lifted in October this year.

Israel accused Iran of violating sanctions and submitted photos of the anti-tank guided missiles in Libya to Guterres in May. Just weeks later, Iran wrote to Guterres and “categorically rejected” the Israeli claims as “totally baseless.”

Israel said the photos surfaced in November 2019 and that the weapons were being used by militias linked to Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA), which has been fighting the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

“Based on the Secretariat’s analysis of the photographs provided, the Secretariat established that one of the four anti-tank guided missiles had characteristics consistent with the Iranian-produced Dehlavieh, though no production date for this anti-tank guided missile was visible,” Guterres’ report said.

“The Secretariat is unable to ascertain if this anti-tank guided missile had been transferred to Libya in a manner inconsistent with resolution 2231 (2015),” the report said.

Guterres reports twice a year to the Security Council on the implementation of the 2015 resolution.

Libya has also been subjected to a UN arms embargo since 2011. Independent UN experts report separately to the Security Council on the implementation of those measures.

Guterres also told the council that – based on photographic analysis – 476,000 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition, seized by Australian forces in June 2019



in international waters off the Gulf of Oman, did not appear to have been manufactured by Iran.



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UN: 20,000 foreign fighters in Libya are a 'serious crisis'