

Iran closes mosques, schools in deadly 'third wave' of coronavirus

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Reuters

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JEDDAH:: Mosques, schools, universities, beauty salons, cafes, gyms, museums, theaters and swimming pools in 25 of Iran's 31 provinces were ordered to close for 10 days from next Wednesday.

In Tehran, the closure of beauty salons, teahouses, cinemas, libraries and fitness clubs has been extended for a week.

Police will make unannounced visits to other high-risk businesses, and any found to be breaking health rules will be shut down. Weddings, funeral gatherings and conferences in the capital have been banned.

Authorities have blamed a sharp increase in coronavirus cases on people failing to follow restrictions, and President Hassan Rouhani said an operations headquarters would be set up to ensure compliance.

Iran was slow to respond to the pandemic when the first cases emerged there in February, and is now the worst-affected country in the Middle East. It recorded several recent daily fatality and infection highs, with figures on the rise since September.

Health Ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said on Saturday there had been 7,820 new cases in the previous 24 hours, taking the total to 612,772, and the death toll rose by 386 to 34,864.

Most analysts believe the real figures are higher. "The disease's spread ... especially in the city of Tehran is worse than what the government has revealed so far," Etemad daily wrote on Saturday.

Calls are growing for a full national lockdown, which Rouhani has resisted because the Iranian economy, already collapsing under US sanctions, could not cope.

One leading doctor said daily fatalities could reach 900 unless tougher measures were taken.

"The country, or high-risk cities, must be completely quarantined for two to three weeks," said Alireza Najji, head of the virology department at Iran's top respiratory disease hospital, Masih Daneshvari.

In Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, the virus remained largely under control. Health chiefs reported 403 new cases on Saturday, taking the total to 347,282, and the death toll rose by 19 to 5,402. Worldwide the virus has infected more

than 46 million people and killed nearly 1.2 million.

Amid fears of a “second wave” of infection sweeping Europe, Austria’s government declared a second mass shutdown and a curfew from this week until the end of November, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed a new lockdown in England until Dec. 2.



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Iranian man arrested over deaths of family in English Channel
Virus sets Iran record again – this time infections

[Over 3 million virus cases reported in Mideast](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-10-31 02:16

DUBAI: The number of reported coronavirus cases has gone over 3 million in the Middle East, an Associated Press count showed on Friday, with the true number likely even higher.

Across the Mideast, there have been over 75,000 deaths attributed to the virus by health authorities, the AP count relying on reported figures by individual countries shows.

There have been 2.5 million recoveries from the virus causing the COVID-19 illness.

In the Mideast, the hardest-hit nation remains Iran, which served as the initial epicenter of the virus in the region. In Iran alone, authorities say there have been over 600,000 confirmed coronavirus cases, with some 477,000 recoveries and 34,000 deaths. Yet even those numbers are believed to be low, Iranian officials say.

NUMBER

Deaths have been reported in the Middle East region due to the coronavirus, according to health authorities.

In some war-torn nations, it remains difficult to know the scope of the pandemic as well. In Yemen for instance, it's believed that the vast majority of the country's cases have gone undiagnosed and untreated, and health workers have said only those who are near death are usually brought to hospitals.



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Leader of banned charity seeks asylum from Turkey amid Macron-Erdogan row
Middle East leaders join world in condemnation of deadly France attack

Tunisian family of alleged Nice knifeman in disbelief over attack

Author:

Sat, 2020-10-31 02:07

SFAX/TUNISIA: The family of a man detained for killing three churchgoers in France weeks after leaving his home in Tunisia has told AFP they are struggling to believe he carried out the attack.

"It's not normal," said Brahim Issaoui's brother Yassine, incredulous that his sibling was responsible for the attack, which came amid widespread anger among Muslims over comments by French President Emmanuel Macron.

Macron had strongly defended secular values and the right to mock religion after a French schoolteacher, who had shown his class cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad deemed offensive to Muslims, was murdered earlier this month in a Paris suburb.

Issaoui, 21, is in serious condition after being shot multiple times by police in the aftermath of Thursday's brutal knife attack in the southern city of Nice. Born to a family of modest means in the central Tunisian city of Sfax, Issaoui had turned to religion and isolated himself in the past two years, his relatives told AFP.

"He prayed ... (and) went from home to work and back, not mixing with others or leaving the house," said his mother, crying as she clutched a passport photo of the young man in a white hoodie.

But before that "he drank alcohol and used drugs. I used to tell him, 'we are poor and you're wasting money?' He would reply if God wills it, he will guide me to the right path, it's my business'," she added

Tunisia, where before a 2011 revolution, authorities controlled the practicing of religion and repressed dissent, saw a rise in radical Islam after the uprising and a wave of jihadist attacks in 2015.

While the security situation has greatly improved, sporadic attacks still take place, targeting security forces in particular.

One of 11 siblings, Issaoui lived with his parents in a modest house on a potholed road in a working class neighborhood near an industrial zone on the outskirts of Sfax.

His mother said her son had dropped out of high school and had worked as a motorcycle mechanic.

Having put some money aside, he opened an unlicensed petrol station, similar to those found across Tunisia, where most economic activity takes place on the margins of the official system.

"I told him to rent a small shop with the 1,100 to 1,200 dinars (around \$400

which he had saved) in order to be able to work,” said his mother, who did not want to give her name.

“He told me he wanted to set up a stall to sell petrol.”

Issaoui joined a wave of Tunisians departing for Italy that has grown in recent months due to the combined pressures of the Covid-19 crisis, which has exacerbated already soaring unemployment, and a political crisis.

The number of Tunisians emigrating illegally to Italy reached a record 20,000 after the 2011 revolution, before falling sharply. The number of arrivals has been on the rise again since 2017.

Issaoui had already tried once before to reach Europe, and did not tell his family he was making another attempt, according to his brother.

After successfully reaching Italy and finding work harvesting olives, his brother added, he made his way to France.

“He said he went to France because it was better for work and there were too many people in Italy,” Yassine said.

The family said he called the evening of October 28, the day before the attack, telling them he had just arrived in the country.

Incredulous, they said they could not understand how he would be able to carry out the attack in Nice just a few hours after arriving in France.

While many Tunisians condemned Macron’s statements on Islam, it sparked debate on freedom of speech – seen as one of the most solid achievements of the country’s 2011 revolution.



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Tunisia bans internal travel to contain pandemic France back in coronavirus lockdown as US surges to daily record

Security forces keep radical protesters away from French Embassy in Beirut

Fri, 2020-10-30 22:27

BEIRUT: Lebanese security forces prevented the arrival of hundreds of protesters at the French ambassador's residence and the French Embassy in Lebanon on Friday.

They feared the recurrence of riots similar to the ones that erupted in front of the Danish Embassy in Ashrafieh, Beirut, in 2006, and led to 28 people being injured, damage to storefronts, and the burning of the consulate building and terrorizing of people.

A few hundred worshippers left mosques after Friday prayers and marched to defend the Prophet Muhammad.

Calls for a demonstration by radical Islamic groups spread on social media platforms.

Khaldoun Qawwas, Dar Al-Fatwa's media spokesperson, told Arab News: "These groups have nothing to do with Dar Al-Fatwa, which has already announced its position regarding what happened in France in two separate statements."

Sheikh Abdul Latif Deryan, the grand mufti of Lebanon, in a statement issued a week earlier, said that "freedom of opinion and expression does not entail insulting the beliefs and symbols of others, and this requires a reconsideration of the concept of absolute freedom."

He stressed the "renunciation of violence and confrontation of radicalism and terrorism that has no religion or race."

Security forces had anticipated Friday's protest and tightened security in the heart of Beirut, since the embassy and the French ambassador's residence are located where roads leading to the city's western and eastern neighborhoods intersect. This led to a huge traffic jam in the capital.

The protest's starting point was the Gamal Abdel Nasser Mosque in Al-Mazraa, situated only a few kilometers from the Residence des Pins (Pine Residence).

Three major security checkpoints – one set up by the riot police – separated the Residence des Pins and protesters, some of whom were transported by buses from the north of Lebanon to Beirut.

Protesters held Islamic signs and chanted slogans denouncing France, its President Emmanuel Macron and its former colonization of the country. Some

protesters tried to remove barbed wire and threw stones, water bottles and batons at the security forces. Another group burned the French flag. Security forces responded by throwing tear gas canisters, leading to the retreat of the protesters.

In a statement, Lebanon's Supreme Council of the Roman Catholic condemned "the terrorist attack in the French city of Nice."

The council considered that "this terrorist crime has nothing to do with Islam and Muslims. It is an individual act carried out by terrorists haunted by radicalism, obscurantism and the rejection of the French people's historical civilizational values. Through their acts, they abuse the spirit of tolerance, coexistence, acceptance of the other and the freedom of thought and belief which all religions call for."

The council called for "staying away from defaming religions and beliefs and inciting hate and resentment among people, raising the voice of moderation, wisdom and reason, working together in the spirit of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together announced by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb from the UAE last year."

During the Friday sermon, Grand Jaafari Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Kabalan condemned "any criminal act against any people, including the French people." He added: "We categorically reject what happened in Nice yesterday, strongly condemn it and consider it a blatant and insolent attack on Muslims before others."

He simultaneously condemned "the official French position that affronted the Prophet, took lightly and made light of the feelings of millions of Muslims."





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Leader of banned charity seeks asylum from Turkey amid Macron-Erdogan row
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[Leader of banned charity seeks asylum from Turkey amid Macron-Erdogan row](#)

Fri, 2020-10-30 22:20

ANKARA: The prospect of granting asylum to Idriss Sihamedi, the founder of a Muslim charity that has been shut down in France over his alleged ties to the "radical Islamist movement," stirred debate about the potential repercussions amid the already escalating French-Turkish spat.

The Turkish interior ministry announced on Oct. 29 that Ankara will assess Sihamedi's request for himself and his team after receiving his official application.

Sihamedi, the founder of the BarakaCity NGO, claimed that he no longer felt safe in France. His NGO was closed officially on Oct. 28 on the grounds that it "incites hate, has relations with the radical Islamist movement and justifies terrorist acts."

He posted his asylum request on his official Twitter account in both French and Turkish, tagging Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He also alleged he had received death threats.

His post received a quick reply from the Turkish interior ministry's migration management department: "Hello Sihamedi. If you and your colleagues were to personally apply to our institution with your surname, first name, identity information, petition for an asylum request and your passport number, your request will be assessed."

However, experts think that proceeding with the asylum request of such radicals means playing with fire.

"I think Erdogan is continuing to play a dangerous game by courting relationships with radical figures and in some cases jihadists," Colin Clarke, senior research fellow on terror-financing networks at the Soufan Center, told Arab News. "Turkey is already viewed as a hot spot for jihadists given its proximity to Iraq and Syria."

Sihamedi is accused of inciting hatred, encouraging people to violent acts, maintaining relations within the radical Islamist movement, money laundering

in the name of Salafi organisations and expressing support for Hitler and the Nazis. He is also blamed for organizing suicide attacks and supporting Daesh.

According to Clarke, if Turkey grants asylum to Sihamedi and his team, it may create trouble, both domestically but also with NATO allies.

“Moving forward with actions like this could easily backfire on Turkey and cause considerable blowback. I find these overt flirtations with radical Islamists counterproductive and short-sighted,” he said.

Sihamedi was deported from Turkey last year in May at France’s request and his passport was confiscated at Istanbul airport.

BarakaCity was founded in 2010 in Evry-Courcouronnes (Essonne). The Islamic humanitarian NGO has been closely monitored by French intelligence since 2014. Its buildings were raided several times in 2015 and 2017, and it was investigating for “terrorist financing” and “terrorist criminal association” for three years.

The NGO has said it wants to move its headquarters to another country. At a time when relations between Paris and Ankara are more strained than ever, the Turkish branch of the NGO is headed by a Franco-Turkish national known for his Salafi credentials.

“The French government dissolved BarakaCity also because in the past the NGO received money from Samy Amimour, a member of the Bataclan terrorist commando group in 2015, and from Larossi Abballa, who in 2016 killed a policeman and his wife in Magnanville,” said Matteo Pugliese, associate research fellow at Milan-based think tank ISPI.

“According to the French government, BarakaCity provides a sort of ideological justification for violent radicals, especially when it calls for the punishment of those who publish cartoons or criticize Islam. I think that we are talking about a grey zone, where non-violent extremism meets violent radicalization.”

Sihamedi was released under judicial supervision and is due to face trial in December.

French government also announced plans to dissolve other associations suspected of supporting extremist ideologies.

“If Turkey grants asylum to Sihamedi, France will use this to accuse the country of sheltering Islamists who radicalize people with online propaganda,” Pugliese said. “This is part of the verbal escalation between Macron and Erdogan and will be used by both for political internal goals.”



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Asylum seekers suing UK over illegal detention Half of Aquarius migrants 'seek asylum in France': Spanish govt