

Iran fuels humanitarian crisis in Yemen, says foreign minister

Thu, 2020-09-10 22:53

AL-MUKALLA: The internationally recognized government of Yemen has once again accused Iran of undermining security in Yemen and other countries by supplying arms and funds to its allied militias.

Speaking at a virtual Arab League session on Wednesday, Yemeni Foreign Minister Mohammed Al-Hadrami said the Iranian regime poses a grave threat to stability and security in the Arab world and that the Iran-backed Houthi militia fuels his country's worsening humanitarian crisis.

"Iran has caused great harm to Yemen and the region, as it uses the wealth of its people to arm and finance a militia outside its territory to blatantly interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries," the Yemeni minister said, adding that his government has sought a peaceful solution to end the Houthi coup against the internationally recognized government and the Houthis' military expansion in Yemen.

Yemeni governments have long accused Iran of arming and financing the Houthi rebellion in Yemen that has claimed thousands of lives.

Following the interception of arms shipments to the Houthis, the Yemeni government have asked the international community to impose harsher sanctions on the Iranian regime in order to curb its military support to militias in the region, including the Houthis.

In regard to the Stockholm Agreement, Al-Hadrami stressed that his government would not allow the Houthis to take advantage of a truce in the western city of Hodeidah under the agreement to escalate military operations in other parts of the country, including Marib and Jouf.

"Due to the continuing intransigence of the Houthis, we realized today that the agreement is useless and did not lead to anything. Rather, it turned into a new phase of escalation, exacerbation of the conflict, and increased the suffering of Yemenis," the minister said.

He highlighted threats including the rusting oil tanker in the Red Sea and Houthi looting of humanitarian supplies.

Meanwhile, more than 25 Houthis have been killed and more than 30 others captured since Wednesday morning in the northern province of Jouf, Rabia Al-Qurashi, the Yemeni army spokesman in the province, told Arab News on Thursday.

Backed by hundreds of tribesmen and under air cover from Arab coalition planes, the Yemeni army launched an offensive on Houthi-controlled areas east of Hazem, the capital of Jouf province. The army pushed 15 kilometers into a large desert area in the province after killing and capturing dozens of

Houthis.

“By taking complete control of Al-Nodhoub and liberating neighboring areas, we secured the northern side of the city of Marib from Houthi incursions,” Al-Qurashi said by telephone. A large number of tribesmen from Dahem and Abeda tribes took part in the fighting along with army troops, Al-Qurashi said, adding that the army seized five armed vehicles and coalition aircraft destroyed several others.

In addition to expelling the Houthis from Jouf, military operations in the province are also intended to ease Houthi military pressure on government forces in the neighboring Marib province, Yemeni military commanders say.

Al-Qurashi said that government troops achieved that objective on Thursday by cutting off Houthi supply lines from parts of Jouf.

In the central province of Marib, Yemen’s Defense Ministry said fierce fighting erupted over recent days as the Houthis tried to take control of various areas.

On Wednesday, Yemeni media said that Brig. Gen. Rashad Mohammed Al-Hakimi, commander of 3rd Border Guard Brigade operations, was killed in action against the Houthis in an undisclosed location.



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Houthis risk hampering COVID-19 efforts after closing Yemen’s Sanaa airport

Iraq reforms stymied by wave of attacks blamed on pro-Iran groups

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-10 01:23

BAGHDAD: War-scarred Iraq hopes to launch reforms and revive its battered economy, but the drive is being derailed by a wave of violence blamed largely on shadowy pro-Iranian groups.

Since Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi took office in May, he has promised to rein in rogue militias, fight corruption and roll out long-awaited restructuring after years of war and insurgency.

But the closer his government gets to its stated aims, the more armed actors with suspected links to Washington's arch enemy Tehran are lashing out, top Iraqi officials and analysts told AFP.

"Every time these groups see us getting close to their military or economic interests, they either launch rockets or propaganda campaigns to distract us," said one senior government official.

Violence was already rising before Kadhimi traveled to Washington last month to meet US President Donald Trump, who was Wednesday expected to announce further troop withdrawals from Iraq. But the situation has only destabilized further.

Late Tuesday, a bomb hit a supply convoy heading to an Iraqi base where US troops are deployed, killing one member of the Iraqi security forces.

On Sept. 3, an attack targeted the Baghdad headquarters of British-American security company G4S. One intelligence official told AFP a drone had dropped an explosive charge on the building.

No faction claimed responsibility, but Tehran-backed groups had accused G4S of complicity in January's US drone strike that killed Iran's top general Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad.

Days earlier, a UN worker was wounded when an improvised explosive device detonated underneath an aid convoy in the northern city of Mosul.

A faction identifying itself as part of the "Islamic resistance" – a catch-all phrase for pro-Iran factions – took responsibility, accusing the UN of using its convoys to transport American spies.

"Your vehicles will burn in the streets of Iraq," it threatened online.

A half-dozen previously unheard-of such factions have made similar threats in recent months under the "Islamic resistance" banner, but officials say they

are a smokescreen.

“Five groups, including Kataeb Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl Al-Haq and others, are behind the recent instability across the country,” an Iraqi intelligence officer said.

These hard-line groups are members of Iraq’s Hashed Al-Shaabi, a state-sponsored network dominated by factions close to Iran and wary of the US.

US officials have made similar accusations, naming Kataeb Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl Al-Haq as the real perpetrators of rocket attacks on American installations in Iraq.

The same groups had accused Kadhemi of plotting against Soleimani when the former was Iraq’s top intelligence official and were furious when he rose to become premier.

They have understood Kadhemi’s pledges to reign in armed groups as an attempt to clip their wings, officials and experts have told AFP.

Beyond escalating rocket attacks, the groups have also ramped up pressure through unconventional media outlets.

Anonymous channels on messaging application Telegram publish taunting warnings of attacks on military convoys well before they happen, deepening a sense of impunity.

The same forums have targeted Iraqi television channels critical of Iran.

Dijla TV was torched last week after the Telegram channels turned on them, and a new wave of threats have targeted Sunni-owned UTV.

The campaign began after the US government seized the website domains of Al-Etejah, an Iraqi television station linked to Kataeb Hezbollah.

The government is not looking for a direct confrontation with these groups, said Kadhemi’s spokesman Ahmad Mulla.

“Instead, we are looking to dry up their funding resources by targeting border crossings,” used for lucrative smuggling from Iran, Mulla told AFP.

Officials knew this could be dangerous. When the PM launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign on Iraq’s porous borders, they braced for the worst.

“They will blackmail officials, threaten their families, mobilize the tribes and maybe even commit assassinations,” one senior official told AFP in July.

Indeed, two anti-government activists were gunned down weeks later in the southern port city of Basra, and tribal violence erupted north of Baghdad.

“We are constantly putting out fires, so we can’t properly focus on the bigger strategy,” another Iraqi official said, about Baghdad’s efforts to reform the state and revitalize an economy hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and

low oil prices.

A third official told AFP that Iraq's Finance Minister Ali Allawi missed his Aug. 24 deadline to submit an economic reform plan to parliament because of the recent tumult.

Last week, Kadhemi set up an anti-corruption council, authorizing the elite troops of the Counter-Terrorism Service to arrest officials usually considered too senior to touch.

His forces also carried out search operations in Basra and Baghdad to seize unlicensed arms, but few have turned up.

Iraqi security expert Fadel Abou Raghif said the situation was "dangerous."

"Ultimately, Kadhemi should open a real dialogue with the spiritual leaders of these groups to avoid a clash."



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After highest virus increase yet, Iraq warns it may 'lose control' UK envoy to Iraq threatened by pro-Iran militias

Morocco extends health emergency as virus cases spike

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-10 01:03

RABAT: Morocco's government on Wednesday extended a medical state of emergency until next month in the face of a sharp rise in coronavirus cases.

"Today, the cabinet approved a project for a decree extending until October 10 the duration of the medical state of emergency to combat Covid-19," Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El-Othmani tweeted.

Morocco's economic capital of Casablanca, with 3.3 million residents, has been under lockdown since Monday, including a nighttime curfew and closure of schools.

Emergency measures were first put in place in March.

Casablanca, along with Marrakesh, had already been subject to a series of restrictions three weeks ago, including beach closures and shortened business hours.

All exits to major cities in the North African country have been closed, with travel only allowed with "exceptional authorization" issued by local authorities.

"We risk being submerged by the virus," Health Minister Khalid Ait Taleb said Sunday. "So drastic measures are in order, otherwise the situation risks spinning out of control in coming days."

With more than 1,000 confirmed cases a day since the start of August, Moroccan media have been critical of the handling of the health crisis.

The authorities blame the spread of Covid-19 in Morocco on people's failure to adhere to health protocols.

The country of 35 million inhabitants has recorded more than 1,400 deaths from coronavirus and over 75,721 confirmed cases.



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Morocco sees travel mayhem after snap movement restrictions
Morocco shuts down major cities after spike in coronavirus cases

[Syria battles forest fires for seventh day straight](#)

Author:

AFP

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Wed, 2020-09-09 16:49

DAMASCUS: Syrian firefighters and army helicopters Wednesday battled forest fires for a seventh consecutive day in government-held areas of the war-torn country, state media said.

Damascus ally Iran sent in a firefighting plane Wednesday carrying 40 tons of water to help fight the fires in the hilly woodlands of Latakia and Hama provinces, in northwestern and central Syria respectively, state news agency SANA said.

State media has published repeated images of billowing smoke above tree tops

and charred vegetation.

“Numerous fires have been put out, others brought under control, but the fires continue to rage in some areas” of Latakia, forestry official Hassan Fares told AFP.

The agriculture ministry said steep terrain was an obstacle to fire trucks being able to reach the fire hit areas quickly.

There was no immediate data for how large an area had been affected overall. But Hama governor Mohammed Al-Hazouri said the blaze had ravaged eight square kilometers (three square miles) of agricultural land in his province alone. Summer fires, sometimes sparked by accident and generally not linked to the war, are common in Syria, but residents have said this year’s are worse than usual.

Syria’s war has killed more than 380,000 people, displaced millions from their homes, and decimated the country’s economy.







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UN detects virus cases in Syrian refugee camp in Jordan
Presumed Israeli strikes kill 16 pro-Iran fighters in Syria

[Lebanon president requests contact with US Embassy over sanctions on ex-ministers](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-09 23:57

BEIRUT: Lebanon's President Michel Aoun has asked his interim foreign minister to contact the US embassy about the imposition of sanctions on two of the country's former ministers, the presidency media office said on Wednesday.

Aoun also requested contact be made with the Lebanese embassy in Washington "in order to understand the circumstances" behind the decision to place the

politicians, allied with the Shiite Muslim group Hezbollah, on its sanctions list.

The US Treasury on Tuesday announced it was imposing sanctions on former finance minister and top Amal official Ali Hassan Khalil and former public works and transportation minister Youssef Fenianos, a senior member of the Christian Marada Movement.

The treasury department said they "provided material support to Hezbollah and engaged in corruption." The move was Washington's strongest warning against Hezbollah's allies.

Khalil is currently a member of the Lebanese Parliament and Hezbollah and its allies control majority seats in parliament.

The Shiite Amal group is headed by Lebanon's longtime Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and the Marada Movement is an organization allied with Hezbollah and Syrian President Bashar Assad's government.

The sanctions came as Lebanon grapples with an unprecedented economic and financial crisis and deals with the aftermath of a devastating explosion at Beirut's port that killed more than 190, wounded 6,500 and caused damage worth billions of dollars.

The sanctions also came as prime minister-designate Mustapha Adib works to form a new Cabinet to replace the one that resigned on Aug. 10, six days after nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate detonated in Beirut. The disaster fueled outrage against a ruling class that has run the country for decades amid widespread corruption and mismanagement.

Some analysts in Lebanon saw the sanctions as a message to Hezbollah's allies to review their links with the Iran-backed group, especially by targeting a Christian ally for the first time.

"Fenianos and Ali Hassan Khalil are two central figures in the coalition that is led by Hezbollah," said Ali Hamadeh, a political writer at An-Nahar newspaper who is often critical of the Iran-backed group.

He added that by sanctioning Fenianos, the US is sending a message to Frangieh, the Marada chief, who is a presidential hopeful. Hamadeh said Hezbollah's non-Shiite allies will now have to "think seriously about the repercussions of their relations with Hezbollah."

Amal denounced the US sanctions against one of its senior members in a statement on Wednesday, saying they infringe on Lebanon's sovereignty and will not succeed in extracting any concessions.

(With Reuters and AP)



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Lebanese army puts out fire at Beirut Port