[Relics of its golden past, Mosul's trains left to rust](#)

Author:
Wed, 2020-07-29 02:09

MOSUL: Nearly a century ago, Iraqis and Westerners stood here with tickets to Berlin, Istanbul or Venice. Today, the rusting tracks and overturned carriages of Mosul's train station betray the city's isolation.

Battered by sanctions against the old regime of Saddam Hussein, back-to-back conflicts and little investment, the once grandiose train station in the Iraqi city's western half is a shadow of its former self.

The first train rumbled into Mosul station in 1940 from the capital Baghdad, then roared out to Istanbul to join the celebrated Orient Express — taking passengers as far as Paris, 4,400 km away.

In the 1950s, novelist Agatha Christie arrived at Mosul station, which later featured in her detective stories.

Mosul was an essential stop in the Iraqi Republic Railway system, which for decades linked Baghdad to 72 locations every day via 2,000 km of tracks.

"Every day, there were either passenger trains or cargo trains," recalled Amer Abdallah, 47, who worked as a train conductor in Mosul up until a decade ago, when the last train pulled out of town.

At the bombed-out station, the father of five caressed a rusting locomotive, his face contorting into a grimace. "My darling," he said, his nickname for this train engine.

Abdallah and others have fond memories of trips west to Syria or south to Basra, bridging cities and peoples that now feel brutally blocked off from one another.

"For just 1,000 or 2,000 dinars (around $1), we could go to Baghdad or elsewhere in Iraq," said Ali Ogla, a father of seven who used to take the train regularly.

"It was a comfortable way of traveling for sick or handicapped people. When it comes to the cargo, we'd be sure it would arrive on time and in good shape," Ogla said.

The station was more than just a transport hub: It was Mosul's economic engine and a source of national pride.

"The station hosted one of Mosul's oldest hotels, coffee shops, gardens, a garage for horse-drawn carriages and later, for cars," said railway engineer Mohammed Abdelaziz.

Railway and station employees, businessmen, restaurant and cafe owners and taxi drivers all made a living from the train traffic through Mosul, Abdelaziz said.

King Faisal II, toppled in the bloody coup of 1958, had his own reception room within the station.

Egyptian musical diva Umm Kulthum passed through it and in 1970, the station agreed to silence its bells and whistles during a concert by Lebanese singer Sabah.

But in the 1990s, crippling international sanctions made it hard to get parts to maintain the trains and in 2003, the US-led invasion opened the door to a wave of bombing then sectarian violence across the country.

Still, trains roared out of the Mosul station every week, either 400 kilometers south to Baghdad, west to Syria or north to the Turkish border city of Gaziantep.

On May 31, 2009, a truck bomb destroyed much of the station and in July 2010, the last train left Mosul on a one-way trip to Gaziantep.

But things got even worse: In June 2014, Daesh overran the city and declared it the Iraqi capital of its so-called "caliphate." The station, until then left rusting in the sun, became a battlefield. "Eighty percent of it was destroyed," said Qahtan Loqman, deputy head of Iraq's northern railway.

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Tags:
Mosul

UN: Reconstruction of landmark Mosul mosque to begin in 2020Amid security worries, gun sales thrive in Iraq's Mosul

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[Third Iraq protester dies of tear gas canister wound this week](#)

Author:
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BAGHDAD: An Iraqi protester died on Tuesday after being shot with a tear gas canister in overnight skirmishes with police in the capital, medical and security sources said.

The clashes came just hours after Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi instructed security forces not to "fire a single bullet" at demonstrators, following the deaths of two other protesters Monday morning in Baghdad.

But by Monday evening, the confrontations in the capital's main anti-government protest camp of Tahrir Square had started anew.

"He was shot in the head and chest, and more than a dozen others were wounded. He was in intensive care and died this morning," a medic said.

The protests began Sunday night in Baghdad and several southern cities, expressing fury at poor public services as temperatures topping 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) have swelled demand for air-conditioning and overwhelmed dilapidated power grids. The protests quickly turned violent in the capital, with two men dying on Monday morning after being hit directly by tear gas canisters that are otherwise fired in arced and less powerful trajectories to disperse protesters.

The deaths threaten to reignite an unprecedented protest movement against government graft and incompetence that erupted across Baghdad and southern Iraq in October.

Violence at those grassroots rallies had left around 550 people dead and more than 30,000 wounded, and prompted the resignation of then-premier Adel Abdul Mahdi.

Abdel Mahdi was widely criticized for failing to hold security forces to account and Kadhimi, who came to power in May, vowed to be different.

He pledged to carry out a probe into protester deaths and promised dialogue with the movement, which had largely died down following a surge in geopolitical tensions and amid the coronavirus pandemic.

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[Hezbollah playing with fire: Netanyahu](#)

Author:
Tue, 2020-07-28 00:59

BEIRUT: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Hezbollah was "playing with fire" after border clashes on Monday. The Lebanese Shiite group denied all involvement.

Netanyahu said that Hezbollah and the Lebanese government "bear responsibility" for the attempt by gunmen to infiltrate Israeli territory, which resulted in an exchange of gunfire but no reported casualties.

"Hezbollah is playing with fire and our response will be very strong," the Israeli premier said.

His remarks came as the head of the UNIFIL mission, Maj. Gen. Stefano Del Cole, urged both the Lebanese and Israeli sides to exercise maximum restraint

after the Hezbollah attack on Monday, which reportedly targeted an Israeli military patrol.

Hezbollah's operation was in response to the Israeli airstrike south of the Syrian capital, Damascus, on July 20, killing Ali Kamel Mohsen Jawad, a member of Hezbollah.

Jawad was the first Hezbollah fighter to die in Syria since the group's secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah warned in August 2019 that "the death of any Hezbollah fighter in Syria will cause a response from Lebanon."

Lebanese reporters stationed along the southern border for days in an anticipation of a response from Hezbollah said that "a Kornet missile attack targeted an Israeli vehicle, while gunfire targeted an Israeli car in the Ruwaysat Al-Alam region in the Shebaa Farms."

A spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Avichay Adraee, said: "The Israeli army thwarted a sabotage operation planned and carried out by a Hezbollah cell of 3 to 4 members who advanced a few meters into a sovereign Israeli area. No casualties were recorded among Israeli soldiers, while the health condition of the infiltrators remains unknown."

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz had said on Sunday that "Israel does not seek escalation but will firmly respond to any attack targeting it."

The Israeli artillery responded by shelling Lebanese border areas with the Lebanese National News Agency (NNA) saying that "155 millimeter shells targeted the eastern heights of the town of Kafr Shuba and the Ruwaysat Al-Alam area for an hour, causing fires."

Ruwaysat Al-Alam has a Lebanese Army base and a UNIFIL base.

Extensive overflights were carried out by Israeli fighters, reconnaissance aircrafts and helicopters at a low altitude in the region.

"An artillery shell fell on the house of citizen Fawzi Abu Alwan in the town of Habariyeh as a result of the Israeli shelling of Lebanese villages in Al-Arqoub area," the NNA reported.

Israeli reconnaissance aircrafts were continuously present in the Lebanese airspace throughout the weekend, while an Israeli drone was shot down inside the Lebanese territory.

Netanyahu said that he was following up on what is happening on the northern borders, stressing that "the army is ready to deal with all scenarios."

"Our policy is clear. We will not allow Iran to have a military foothold along our borders with Syria" Netanyahu said on social media. "We set this policy years ago and we are committed to it. Lebanon and Syria bear the responsibility for any attack launched from their territories against us.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab spoke to President Michel Aoun, Speaker Nabih Berri and Lebanese army commander Joseph Aoun to follow up on the latest

developments.

Lebanese Foreign Minister, Nassif Hitti, told Sky News that "Lebanon has the right to defend itself against any Israeli aggression on its territory," noting that "Israel's history in the region is an aggressive one."

Hezbollah denied any involvement in the fighting: "Everything the enemy's media has claimed about thwarting an infiltration operation from Lebanon into occupied Palestine and the death and injury of Hezbollah members in the shelling that targeted the area surrounding sites controlled by the occupying army in the Shebaa Farms area is completely false. It is an attempt to create imaginary and fake victories," it said.

"The Islamic Resistance did not clash or shoot during today's events. It was rather a one-sided incident carried out by the fearful, anxious and tense enemy.

"Our response to the killing of Ali Kamel Mohsen, who died in an attack in the vicinity of Damascus International Airport is coming. Zionists can only wait to receive the punishment for their crimes. The shelling of Habariyeh today, which hit a civilian home, will not be tolerated."

Main category:
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Tags:
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[Lebanon to impose two-week coronavirus lockdown](#)

Author:
Mon, 2020-07-27 23:57

BEIRUT: Lebanon is imposing a two-week coronavirus lockdown starting July 30, the country's health minister said, as he slammed the "lack of community discipline and disregard" for all preventive measures and warned that the outbreak was taking a "dangerous turn."

The number of confirmed cases on Monday reached 135 and Saturday's cases were the highest since February at 175.

"The number is very large and indicates the seriousness of this stage," said Health Minister Hamad Hassan, following a meeting of a COVID-19 ministerial committee headed by Prime Minister Hassan Diab.

He added that what was happening was another indication of the "rapid spread" of the virus within one week. "The infected person is now spreading the infection to 3 people."

The total lockdown of the country is from July 30 to August 3 and from August 6 until August 10, including the days of Eid Al-Adha. It is a measure intended to relieve pressure on hospitals that have started to get overcrowded. However, the final decision will be taken by the Council of Ministers that will meet Tuesday.

Hassan warned that the community outbreak of the disease was beginning to take a "dangerous turn" and he regretted "the lack of community discipline and disregard for all preventive measures imposed on people."

Fears of COVID-19 have overtaken the country's many financial and economic concerns, with politicians, parliament officials, ministry and court staff taking polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests on Monday and entire towns shutting down.

Although the ministerial committee did not recommend closing Beirut International Airport, it decided that nobody would be allowed into Lebanon from the start of August without a negative PCR test from the departure country.

"Passengers will have to stay in quarantine for two days at their own expense in special centers, pending the results of the second PCR test at the airport," Hassan said. "Those who have the logistical capacity for quarantine will not have to go to these centers."

Hassan requested hospitals to postpone receiving cold medical cases to later

appointments because there were 222 cases within the health sector among doctors, nurses and employees. He called on hospitals to "completely prevent visits to patients or make them minimal."

Lawyers in the Bar Association had to take PCR tests after one of their number was found to have the disease. Employees and judges at the Palace of Justice in Beirut were tested and it was decided to suspend trial sessions for four days.

Fear of contracting the virus has also reached politicians. The minister of defense, Zeina Aker, announced that her daughter had been infected with the virus. Parliament closed on Monday to carry out PCR tests for MPs who had mixed with George Aqis, including Speaker Nabih Berri. Aqis' first test was positive but the second was negative.

The need for hundreds of Syrian workers to take PCR tests before entering Syrian territory has led to overcrowding in Lebanese government hospitals, with long lines of people waiting to be seen at authorized laboratories for testing.

"There was great pressure on the 50 laboratories," Hassan said. "The number of tests increased to between seven and eight thousand daily, which caused a delay in announcing the results and affected the control of positive cases."

Seventeen members of the Lebanese Red Cross contracted the virus from an infected volunteer who had moved one of his relatives to hospital. The relative suffered from burns at home and it was found out that he had COVID-19.

Main category:
Middle-East

[Yemen PM warns against bowing to Houthi bullying over tanker](#)

Author:
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AL-MUKALLA: Yemen's prime minister said the international community should take strong action against Houthi "blackmailing and bargaining" over a decaying oil tanker, the state news agency Saba reported, as he warned about a looming environmental disaster in the Red Sea.

The Safer tanker is carrying more than a million barrels of crude oil and is marooned off the Yemeni city of Hodeidah. Rust has eroded parts of the ship, allowing water to enter.

Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed, speaking to Russia's ambassador to the country, said that the Iran-backed Houthi group had reneged on previous promises to allow UN experts to board the tanker and that there was the risk of heavy pollution.

The ship has not been repaired since 2014, when the Houthis seized control of Hodeidah. The militia has banned international engineers from visiting the ship and insisted on sharing the cargo's revenues.

Saeed urged the international community, the UN, the Security Council and the Russians to put maximum pressure on the rebels in order to avoid an environmental disaster, adding that his government welcomed and would comply with all solutions that would lead to emptying the tanker.

The Yemeni government has suggested selling the oil and using the revenues to pay public servants in Hodeidah and other Yemeni provinces as it fears the Houthis might use the money to pay their fighters.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Mohammed Al-Hadrami also shared his concerns about oil leaks from the tanker in a phone call with Germany's ambassador to Yemen, Karola Molar.

Al-Hadrami urged continued pressure on the Houthis until they allowed UN

experts to see the tanker, Saba reported.

Human Rights Watch on Monday criticized the Houthis' "reckless" denial to allow UN experts to board the ship, urging the Iranian regime to use its leverage to convince the Houthis to change their mind about the visit and prevent an environmental disaster that could contaminate the Red Sea.

"The Houthi authorities are recklessly delaying UN experts' access to the deteriorating oil tanker that threatens to destroy entire ecosystems and demolish the livelihoods of millions of people already suffering from Yemen's war," Gerry Simpson, associate crisis and conflict director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

"Governments concerned about Yemen's humanitarian crisis should recognize the danger the Safer tanker poses and press to avert further tragedy. The Houthis' continued refusal to allow UN access could result in devastating consequences for the environment and people across Yemen and the wider region," Simpson added.

Meanwhile the Aden-based Supreme National Emergency Committee announced on Sunday that it had evacuated all Yemenis who had been stranded abroad due to global coronavirus lockdowns.

It repatriated 17,627 citizens who went back home on 114 flights and voyages from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India, Jordan, Djibouti, the UAE, Sudan and Malaysia, the committee said.

But hundreds of stranded Yemenis also entered the country through land crossings with Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Yemen began repatriation flights in late May, despite concerns about the spread of coronavirus in the country.

The stranded citizens were first asked to supply a negative polymerase chain reaction test, before the government replaced this requirement with temperature checks at airports.

In March, Yemen's internationally recognized government canceled flights to and from the country's airports to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Thousands of Yemenis stranded abroad appealed to the government to arrange rescue flights for them as they had run out of money.

Main category:
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