

Syria reduces fuel subsidies as economic crisis deepens

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BEIRUT: Syria's oil and mineral resources ministry announced Saturday a reduction in automobile fuel subsidies, the latest government measure to tackle a deepening economic crisis.

The ministry said it was revising down its fuel subsidies, excluding from its ration system users of cars with engines of 2,000 cubic centimeters or more, as well as owners of more than one car.

Subsidized fuel is distributed through a smart card system, whereby smaller cars receive up to 100 liters (26 gallons) of fuel a month at 250 Syrian pounds a liter (36 cents per 0.25 gallons.)

Non-subsidized fuel goes for nearly double the price at 450 Syrian pounds a liter (64 cents per 0.25 gallons.) The smart card distribution and limit on subsidized fuel were introduced last year amid an increasing fuel shortage. The economy of the war-ravaged country, also suffering from years of sanctions, saw the local currency plummet before the dollar late last year. That sent prices of basic goods soaring and was soon followed by restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus that limited movement and trade.

The price of vegetables and eggs went up by as much as 75% in March and the government included subsidized bread under the smart card system. It also banned the export of some commodities, including eggs and dairy, to contain the price rise.

The Syria Report, which follows the local economy, reported last month a drop in the consumption of oil by about 50% because of coronavirus movement restrictions – a decline that is likely to have hurt government revenues. The government produces some of its fuel for domestic needs but buys the rest from Iran, which extends a credit line to Damascus, that in turns sells it for a profit on the market.

Restrictions on movement are being gradually lifted. Public transportation resumes operating within provinces starting Sunday.



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Amid ruins of a Syrian town, Ramadan meal reunites a community
For 2nd time, Syrian elections delayed over coronavirus

[HRW: Iran imprisons protesters over Ukraine airplane disaster](#)

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Sat, 2020-05-09 17:49

LONDON: Iran has imprisoned at least 13 people since April for protesting against the shooting down of a passenger jet by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), according to the group Human Rights Watch (HRW).

In a report published on its website, HRW accused the Iranian authorities of “dodging accountability” and “refusing to provide details” about the disaster, while “wasting no time” in bringing prosecutions against people protesting against Iran’s handling of the episode.

The IRGC shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 on Jan. 5, 2020, minutes after it had taken off from Tehran’s Imam Khomeini International Airport, killing all 176 people on board.

Iran initially denied involvement, before stating on Jan. 11 that the plane was caught in the crossfire of the Iranian military response to the assassination of IRGC commander Gen. Qassem Soleimani by a US drone at Baghdad International Airport on Jan. 3 and was shot down in error.

The widespread protests in the country in response to the admission were met with a crackdown described as “brutal” by observers, including HRW.

On Jan. 14, the spokesman for Iran’s judiciary, Gholamhossein Esmaili, said that at least 30 people had been arrested for their part in the protests.

HRW revealed the details of several people who were subsequently convicted.

They included Mostafa Hashemizadeh, a student at the University of Tehran who was sentenced to five years in prison, three months of community service and 74 lashes for “assembly and collusion to disrupt national security.”

Another University of Tehran student, Amir Mohammad Sharifi, was sentenced to six months for “propaganda against the state,” which he said stemmed from him photographing police officers. HRW added that 11 people were sentenced to 8 months in prison for “propaganda against the state, chanting slogans against the Islamic Republic of Iran, and taking photos and videos” at a vigil for the victims of the plane in the city of Amol, in Mazandran province.

Michael Page, HRW’s deputy Middle East director, said: “Iranian authorities are following their usual playbook of dodging accountability. While refusing to provide details about any investigation of culpability for the deadly mistake, judicial officials are wasting no time in sentencing people who protested the loss of 176 lives.

“Instead of prosecuting those who exercised their right to free expression and peaceful assembly, the Iranian authorities should conduct a transparent investigation and cooperate with international bodies to find out exactly what happened in this tragedy.”

Despite admitting culpability, Iran has so far failed to cooperate with the international community over investigating the shooting down of Flight 752 and has not allowed other countries access to evidence or to the site of the crash.

On March 11, according to HRW, Iran’s delegation to the International Civil Aviation Organization “agreed to send black boxes from (the) downed Ukrainian jetliner to Kiev for analysis,” but said that they had failed to materialize. So far, no one has been charged for their role in the incident, and Iranian politicians have speculated that prosecutions remain unlikely.

Of the “unspecified” number of IRGC members and others initially arrested, only one remains in custody, according to Shokrallah Bahrami, head of Iran’s Judicial Organization of the Armed Forces.



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Ukraine to press for plane crash black boxes as Iran minister visits London meeting for Ukraine plane victims urges Iran to hold responsible to account

[Iraqi PM Al-Kadhimi calls on govt to meet peoples' demands](#)

Sat, 2020-05-09 17:38

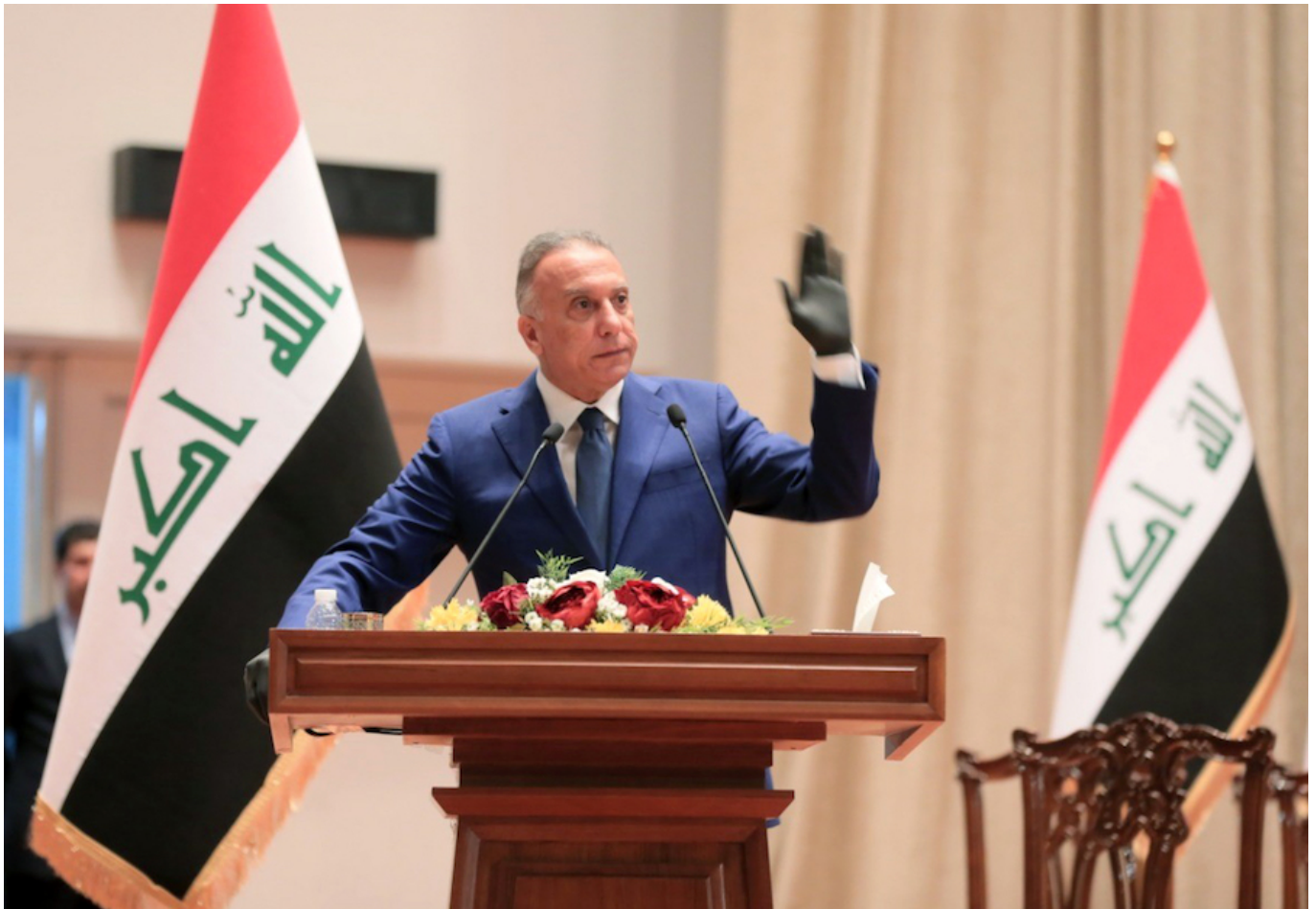
LONDON: Iraq's new prime minister Musafa Al-Kadhimi on Saturday chaired his first cabinet meeting since being sworn in on Thursday.

"Iraqi government must secure safe conditions for upcoming elections," he said, while also calling on the government to work to achieve the demands of the Iraqi people.

Kadhimi also received the US ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman, telling him that it was "essential to maintain security and stability in the region."

He added: "Iraq will not be a proxy arena for settling affairs or a launch pad for attacking any neighboring or friendly country."

Ambassador Silliman assured the new Iraqi prime minister that Washington is ready to support the country and its fight against coronavirus.



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Saudi crown prince calls new Iraqi prime minister

[Pompeo, resuming travel, to visit Israel to meet coalition government](#)

Fri, 2020-05-08 19:24

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will visit Israel in a show of support for the new coalition government, resuming travel after a coronavirus

suspension, the State Department announced Friday.

The top US diplomat and staunch supporter of Israel will meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his centrist rival turned partner Benny Gantz in Jerusalem on May 13, the day the government is expected to be sworn in. The trip comes as President Donald Trump's administration gives its blessing to Netanyahu's plans to annex much of the occupied West Bank, despite warnings from the Palestinians that the move will kill the prospects of a long-term peace agreement.

Pompeo will "discuss US and Israeli efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as regional security issues related to Iran's malign influence," State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortogus said in a statement.

"The US commitment to Israel has never been stronger than under President Trump's leadership," she said.

Pompeo becomes one of the first major officials around the world to resume travel amid a gradual reopening following the coronavirus lockdown.

He last traveled internationally on March 23 for a one-day trip to Afghanistan and Qatar in which he upbraided leaders in Kabul for their infighting and met Taliban leaders on a deal to withdraw US troops.

Pompeo, asked about his Jerusalem trip on Wednesday after it was reported by Israeli media, said he was "hoping to get back out and be on the ground" after the coronavirus restrictions.

"It'll start off smaller, but we're hoping to get back at it, just like we're hoping that we can get the economy back open not only here in the United States but all across the world as well," Pompeo told reporters.

Trump in January unveiled a long-awaited Middle East plan in which he gave the green light for Israel's annexation of areas around Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, which are considered illegal by the rest of the world.

In turn, the Palestinians will have the right to an independent but demilitarized state as well as promises of major investment.

Netanyahu hailed the plan as a historic opportunity. In a coalition agreement with Gantz, the new government can decide to go ahead with annexation starting in July but must consult with the United States – which has indicated it has no objections.

Gantz, who faced Israel's longest-serving prime minister in three inconclusive elections, will take over after 18 months as part of the deal.



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Pompeo delays Hong Kong report to see if China acts to 'further undermine' autonomy
Pompeo: China could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives

[Kuwait imposes 20-day 'total curfew' from May 10 to curb coronavirus](#)

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Fri, 2020-05-08 13:30

DUBAI: Kuwait will enact a "total curfew" from 4pm (1300 GMT) on Sunday through to May 30 to help to curb the spread of the new coronavirus, the

Information Ministry said on Twitter on Friday. Further details of the curfew will be announced soon, it said. Kuwait on April 20 expanded a nationwide curfew to 16 hours a day, from 4pm to 8am, and extended a suspension of work in the public sector, including government ministries, until May 31. On Friday the Gulf state announced 641 new coronavirus cases and three deaths, bringing its total number of confirmed cases to 7,208, with 47 deaths.



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Kuwaiti and GCC artists create online gallery to promote solidarity during COVID-19