

For Iraqis, no easy escape from Iran's domination

Mon, 2020-03-02 00:00

LONDON: More than two months after nonstop anti-government protests prompted Iraq's ethnic Kurdish president to offer a public letter of resignation, the fate of one of the Middle East's most fragile states hangs in the balance.

If President Barham Salih eventually steps down, his replacement will have to contend with two destabilizing and diametrically opposed forces: A grassroots political movement that shows no sign of abating and the deeply entrenched influence of Iran's discredited Shiite revolutionary regime.

The human cost kept rising every month until the streets of Baghdad emptied out amid fears over the coronavirus. According to the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, more than 600 people have died and more than 20,000 people have been injured since the protests began in earnest on Oct. 1, 2019.

Rights activists and organizations on the ground say that Iraqi security forces have become increasingly prone to using lethal force to disperse protesters, evident in the widespread use of deadly, military-grade tear-gas grenades and live ammunition.

While they may be brutalized, Iraq's protesters are not cynical. The demographic makeup of the average protest group testifies to the shared spirit of activism sweeping the country, with the typical protest group made up of the young and the old, men and women, Sunni and Shiite.

This unlikely coalition of protesters has come up with an array of demands, including the resignation of the current legislative representative body, the transparent prosecution of corrupt political representatives and the establishment of fairer electoral laws.

Additionally, the protesters want an end to Iranian interference in Iraqi elections and policymaking, and the replacement of the current political set-up with a government better aligned with the needs and aspirations of the people of Iraq.



Unsurprisingly, one of the key objectives of Sunni protesters is the disbanding of the Popular Mobilization Forces, a politically influential paramilitary organization that is dominated by state-sponsored Shia militias and strongly resembles Iran's IRGC.

Of late, another vulnerability has emerged in the form of Iraq's cultural and religious ties with Iran, which is one of the countries worst hit by coronavirus infections outside of China.

All 13 cases detected so far are linked to Iran, according to Iraq's health ministry. After decades of war and sanctions, Iraq is believed to have fewer than 10 doctors per 10,000 inhabitants.

On the bright side, there is no dearth of political groups that champion Iraq's sovereignty and disapprove of the spread of Iran's tentacles into every area of Iraqi life.

From the anti-sectarian National Independent Iraqi Front, which consists of both Sunni and Shiite leaders, and the Sovereignty Alliance for Iraq (SAI) to the National Wisdom Movement led by Ammar Al-Hakim, Iraqi political entities are increasingly asserting a pro-nationalist identity.

Dr. Herman Schmidt, of the London-based Global Distribution Network, says that Sunni-Shiite groups are beginning to emerge as a counterweight to Iran's hegemonic ambitions.

"What we are seeing is the emergence of Iraq-first organizations, comprising Iraqi nationals and expats who've awoken to the dangers of foreign, specifically Iranian, interests, that seriously hamper Iraq's ability to maintain control over its borders," he told Arab News.

"The emergence of groups such as Sovereignty Alliance for Iraq and National Independent Iraqi Front is showing the world that Iraq wants to be a country for all its people, not merely a battleground for global Sunni-Shiite rivalry

or a pawn in Iran's game to control the Middle East.

"Establishing a unified Iraq with law and order is also indicative of a willingness to attract foreign capital into Iraq in order to rebuild its infrastructure after decades of conflict."

For anyone following Iraq's political trajectory over the past three years, the upsurge in tensions probably came as no surprise.

IRAQ'S SLIPPERY SLOPE

73%

of Iraqis believe their government is not accountable to its citizens.

20/100

Iraq's corruption score.

1/4

children live in poverty.

17%

of men and 27% of women in Iraq are unemployed.

0.8%

GDP growth rate.

9%

of Iraqis live under the poverty line.

13%

have steady water supply.

The anti-government chants that have reverberated across Iraq are prompted broadly by three sources of discontent: An unending cycle of hostilities; Iran's perceived malign influence and economic dominance; and Iraqi politicians' reputation as a corrupt elite out of touch with reality.

Sources: CSIS, Transparency International, UNICEF, The Baghdad Post, The Heritage Foundation

Despite the withdrawal of the bulk of US military forces and the defeat of Daesh as an organized terrorist group, Iraq continues to be wracked by terrorist insurgency, political unrest, extrajudicial abuses and killings, sectarian disputes and transnational criminal activity.

Notwithstanding Iran's success in playing off one sect against another, Iraqi protesters are in no mood to let provincial or national government officials off the hook for the inadequate provision of basic public services, endemic government corruption and lack of employment opportunities.

During the war against Daesh, the Iraqi government managed to evade responsibility for the dismal state of administration and public finances. But now, after years of broken reform promises and declining living standards, it has become impossible for the authorities to contain the pent-up frustration and anger across the country.

Iraqis have no reason to be upbeat about the political outlook.

Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 by a US-led invasion, they have helplessly watched Iran grow its political, intelligence and military footprint across their country.

Over the past three years especially, Iran's intelligence apparatus has exploited Iraq's endless cycle of war and violence to amass unprecedented levels of influence over its political and financial institutions.

Rather than leverage its newfound influence to tamp down violence and heal Iraqi wounds, Tehran has chosen to aggressively tighten its grip over Baghdad and sow discord and chaos.

Iran's agents have bought out parts of Iraq's civil bureaucracy and established what amounts to a foreign intelligence network – stacked with personnel from both the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – inside the country's most populous provinces.

Leaked reports indicate that the objective of many of these operations is the perpetuation of Iraq's role as a client state of Iran. So far, this has been achieved by carefully stoking ethnic and sectarian tensions and fostering a culture of corruption and incompetence.

Analysts say that unless Iraq succeeds in distancing itself from Iran's geopolitical orbit, stronger economic relations between the country on the one hand and, on the other hand, the US and the wealthy GCC bloc will remain a pipe dream.

These potential allies are reluctant to pour investments into Iraq's funds-starved economy mainly because of the entrenched presence of Iran and the attendant geopolitical risks.

"Iran's penetration of the Iraqi security services has scared away foreign investment," said Michael Doran, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington DC.

“An end to Iran’s influence would remove the greatest obstacle to developing the country for the benefit of its own people. Washington has not fully woken up to the benefits that the sovereignty movement can provide to US interests and regional peace and stability.”

With the level of discontent likely to rise in the future due to falling prices of the commodity (oil) on which the state heavily depends for revenue, the Iraqi government does not have the luxury of time.

Independent observers say that Baghdad has two options: To remain a puppet of Iran and employ state security forces in a doomed attempt to repress the protests; or to adopt a pro-sovereignty doctrine that takes the demands of the Iraqi people seriously.

If they wish to preserve their country’s status as a sovereign nation, the Iraqi ruling elite must choose the second option or surrender power.





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Iraq parliament delays vote on a new government over lack of quorum
Iraqi protester killed, dozens injured by security forces in Baghdad

[Greek riot police repel 13,000 migrants trying to cross to Europe from Turkey](#)

Sun, 2020-03-01 22:44

ANKARA: Greek security forces fired tear gas on Sunday to stop up to 13,000 migrants from crossing the border from Turkey amid a growing crisis over the bloody Assad regime offensive in northwest Syria.

The violence in Idlib province has sent hundreds of thousands of civilians

fleeing north toward Turkey, which already hosts more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees and says it can accommodate no more.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has responded on two fronts. First, after an air strike killed 33 Turkish soldiers in Idlib, Turkey launched an offensive to halt the advance of Assad regime forces backed by Russian air power. On Sunday, Turkey shot down two Syrian fighter jets over Idlib and destroyed a military airport in Aleppo, and ground forces exchanged fire.

Second, Erdogan has torn up a 2016 agreement with the EU to halt the flow of refugees from Turkey into Europe, and thrown open the border with Greece. The Turkish president says the EU has not kept to its side of the deal, to pay 6 million euros in aid to Ankara to cope with the influx of migrants.

The announcement triggered an instant rush of thousands of migrants to the border with Greece, which placed crossing points on maximum security alert and deployed riot police at the Kastanies border post.

At least 500 people fled to the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, close to the Turkish coast. On the mainland border, some waded across a shallow section of the Evros River to the Greek side. Authorities in Athens said some migrants prevented from crossing had thrown metal bars and tear-gas canisters at police on the Greek side.

UN refugee agency spokesman Babar Baloch called for "calm and easing of tensions on the border," and urged countries to "refrain from the use of excessive and disproportionate force."

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, said that instead of being concerned about the relatively few refugees trying to enter Greece, the EU should press Russian President Vladimir Putin to halt the indiscriminate bombing of millions of civilians in northwest Syria.

"If the only alternative is a bloodbath in Idlib, the Turkish government will undoubtedly open its border with Syria, but it is already hosting 3.6 million Syrian refugees so we can expect many people who flee the slaughter to continue on to Greece," he told Arab News.

The Syrian military was incapable of carrying out this slaughter without the support of Russian bombers, and Putin had the key to end it, Roth said.

"He may well want a refugee crisis in Europe, since his far-right allies would profit. European governments should change Putin's calculations by imposing targeted sanctions on the Russian officials who are directing these war crimes unless they stop immediately," he said.

Dr. Christina Bache, visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, said the EU and Turkey should have invested every ounce of influence available to promote an inclusive political settlement when the Syrian war began.

"Syrians have become victims of an increasingly authoritarian Turkey and its failing relationship with the EU," she told Arab News. "As long as the EU fails to address its own institutional deficiencies in migration management,

President Erdogan will exploit rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe for the sake of political opportunism.”

Bache said Ankara’s plans to relinquish its responsibility to protect asylum seekers could be violations of the international law principle of non-refoulement, which prevents the return of such migrants to a country where they would be in danger of persecution.

“A political solution remains the most viable path to reconciliation, justice, and sustainable peace in Syria,” she said.







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Migrants clash with Greek police at border after Turkey opens floodgates
Turkey strikes Syrian planes and airports, escalating Idlib fight

[Damascus says to exchange consular missions with Libya's Haftar](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-03-01 19:33

DAMASCUS: Damascus and parallel Libyan authorities opposed to the weak UN-recognized government in Tripoli agreed Sunday to exchange diplomatic missions and confront Turkish "interference," state media said. A delegation representing eastern Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar met Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem in Damascus, state news agency SANA said. "A memorandum of understanding was signed... for the reopening of diplomatic and consular missions," SANA said. Libya has not had any representation in Damascus since 2012, following the fall and killing of longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising. Muallem said diplomatic missions would be reopened in Damascus and the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, controlled by Haftar's forces. The two sides also pledged to coordinate to "confront Turkish interference and aggression against both countries." The agreement comes as tensions spiral between Syrian regime and Turkish forces in northwestern Syria, where bombardment has killed dozens of troops on each side. Turkey backs the Government of National Accord in the Libyan capital Tripoli, and has dispatched troops and pro-Turkish Syrian fighters to the North African country. Haftar, backed by the Syrian regime's main ally Russia, has been battling since April to seize Tripoli from the GNA. Syria's conflict, sparked by the brutal repression of anti-government protests in 2011, has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced millions. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011 as the death toll mounted. Several regional powers, betting on the demise of President Bashar Assad's regime, suspended diplomatic ties with Damascus. Some have since restored those ties. In December 2018, the United Arab Emirates reopened its embassy, followed by Bahrain.



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[Chinese student in Lebanon complains about being subjected to abuse after coronavirus spread](#)

Sun, 2020-03-01 02:58

DUBAI: A Chinese student, who is currently residing in Lebanon, said he is subjected to negative comments in streets due to the spread of coronavirus, which started in his home country.

"I understand your fear of the virus, but I can't bear the name-calling," the

students said in the video.

Amir Wang moved to Lebanon around six months ago, and was very happy to live and study there. He lives in a town called Shhim, south-east of Beirut in the Chouf region.

However, the spread of COVID19 changed his feelings about living in the Levantine country. In a video posted on social media, Wang explained that some people get scared of him and avoid him, while others actually call him 'corona' as a slur to offend him.

He pleaded by saying such negative behavior will not benefit anyone, but shows that those who do it lack conscience, manners and humanity.

"China is our mother, and she is sick... would it be okay for me to call you or your mother names if she were sick?" Wang added.



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Iranian MP dies from coronavirus as Saudi Arabia resists infection
Lebanon shuts schools after fourth coronavirus case
Face masks sell out in Saudi Arabia as coronavirus fears grow
South Korean 'cult' blamed for spike in coronavirus cases

[Iranian MP dies from coronavirus as Saudi Arabia resists infection](#)

Sun, 2020-03-01 00:51

JEDDAH: An Iranian member of parliament died on Saturday after becoming infected with coronavirus, one of nine new fatalities.

The death toll in Iran is now 43, the highest outside China, and the total number infected has risen to 593.

Several, including a vice president, the deputy health minister and five MPs, have tested positive for the virus as the outbreak forced the regime to close the parliament and impose internal travel bans.

Tehran has also ordered the shutting of schools until Tuesday and extended the closure of universities and a ban on concerts and sports events for a week. Authorities have also banned visits to hospitals and nursing homes.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Iran is at the center of the spread of the coronavirus through the Middle East. Qatar and Oman both reported their first cases on Saturday, both linked to travel from Iran. The UAE suspended nursery classes and school trips.

Saudi Arabia is now the only Gulf Arab state not to have reported any cases of the coronavirus, but pharmacies in the Kingdom are nevertheless struggling to meet the demand for face masks.

“Despite assurances by the Ministry of Health, people have been demanding face masks, and I’m seeing more people wearing them in public,” pharmacist Adel Abdul Shakoor told Arab News. “We are out of masks now and usually we have full shelves.”

The Ministry of Health said all measures had been taken to protect the Kingdom against the virus and confirmed that there have been “no known cases” of infection.

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[Virus spreading worldwide as more countries report first cases](#)

[South Korean ‘cult’ blamed for spike in coronavirus cases](#)

Since December the virus has infected more than 85,919 people and killed 2,941, mostly in China.

The first death from the virus in the US was confirmed on Saturday night in Washington state, prompting the governor to declare a state of emergency on Saturday.

Gov. Jay Inslee directed state agencies to use “all resources necessary” to prepare for and respond to the outbreak. The declaration also allows the use of the Washington National Guard, if necessary.

Dr. Jeffrey Duchin, a Seattle and King county health official who works with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said the person who died was a man in his 50s.

President Donald Trump described the person as having a high medical risk. He said healthy Americans should be able to recover if they contract the new virus.

Health officials in California, Oregon and Washington state worried about the novel coronavirus spreading through West Coast communities after confirming at least three patients were infected by unknown means. The patients had not visited an area where there was an outbreak, nor apparently been in contact with anyone who had.

(With AP)





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