

# Iraqi cleric Al-Sistani condemns use of force, 11 protesters wounded

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Fri, 2020-01-31 14:20

BAGHDAD: Iraq's most powerful religious figure Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani reiterated Friday his condemnation of the use of force against anti-government protesters as the mass movement enters a critical juncture and political blocs tussle over naming a new premier.

Meanwhile, influential and radical cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr called for his followers to return to the street, one week after he withdrew support for anti-government demonstrators camped out in Baghdad's Tahrir Square.

Al-Sistani's comments came as unrest continued in Baghdad's Khilani and Wathba squares, where at least 11 demonstrators were wounded Friday by security forces firing tear gas canisters to disperse crowds, according to security and medical officials. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

The area has become a flash point in the recent escalation staged by demonstrators to refocus public attention on the demands of the four-month protest movement after a US airstrike that killed a top Iranian general in Baghdad monopolized Iraqi politics.

Protesters called for 1 million Iraqis to take to the streets Friday to revitalize demonstrations and pressure the government to implement a reform agenda after Al-Sadr withdrew his followers from the street last week. Al-Sadr's pullout was followed by a security crackdown on protest camps. Tents were burned and at least four protesters were killed in Baghdad and Iraq's south.

But on Friday, Al-Sadr issued a statement calling on his followers to "renew" the demonstrations and return to the street, amid deadlock over the naming of a new prime minister. He said large demonstrations were necessary to pressure political elites to form a new "non-controversial" government and hold early elections.

A second statement from Al-Sadr said the call was "effective immediately" and he called on protesters to head to Tahrir Square, epicenter of the anti-government protest movement.

Al-Sadr is the head of political bloc Saeroon, which won the most seats in Iraq's 2018 federal election.

Al-Sadr's departure last week had created clear divisions between his followers and other anti-government protesters in the square.

"All those who are already in protest squares are your brothers," Al-Sadr's statement said. "Never be divided in slogans, sayings or deeds."

Al-Sistani reaffirmed his condemnation of the use of violence against demonstrators in his weekly sermon, delivered in the holy city of Karbala through a representative. Al-Sistani's opinion holds sway over many Iraqis and elites.

His stances have often sided with the protesters who first took to the streets Oct. 1 to decry rampant government corruption, poor services and

unemployment. Though their demands are varied, most want snap elections, reforms and a change of political leadership.

In his sermon he condemned, “the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators, the assassinations and kidnappings of some of them,” and “categorically refused” attempts by security forces to break up peaceful sit-ins using violence and force.”

Al-Sistani also reiterated calls on political blocs to name a new prime minister and form a new government “as soon as possible,” to avoid political crisis and instability.

Outgoing Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned in December under pressure from protesters. Negotiations among divided political factions have come to a deadlock. President Barham Saleh has given parties until Saturday to name a candidate or would do so himself.



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# In former Syria rebel stronghold of Maaret Al-Numan, nothing was spared

Author:

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Fri, 2020-01-31 11:28

MAARET AL-NUMAN, Syria: Once the throbbing heart of the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, Maaret Al-Numan is an eerie ghost town where few buildings have been spared by nine years of war.

Following a major ground offensive, the Syrian army captured the town in the northwestern province of Idlib on Wednesday, a key prize in its push to reconquer the country's last rebel enclave.

A day after government forces moved into the deserted town and set up their first checkpoints there since 2012, the landscape was one of desolation. Maaret Al-Numan, home to around 150,000 people four months ago, is now a field of levelled or gutted buildings, where shops' iron shutters are riddled with bullet holes and shrapnel scars.

The only people left in the once-bustling town are a handful of soldiers taking up positions on the rubble-littered streets.

Majed Marahesh, 27, remembers the day he first visited Maaret Al-Numan 13 years ago with his classmates and teacher. Now he has traded his schoolbooks for a rifle.

"I remember its beauty and refinement," he tells AFP. "I remember the mosaics in its museum. I am back 13 years later but it's not the town I knew."

Maaret Al-Numan is nestled in a UNESCO-listed region of ancient villages and its mosaics museum had achieved international renown.

The museum, housed in an Ottoman-era caravanserai, was seriously damaged in a government barrel bomb attack in 2015.

"Many antiquities have been stolen," Marahesh says, looking at the devastation around him. "There was a lot of damage to the museum."

Among the museum's most prized works is a depiction of the birth and life of Hercules, according to former Syrian antiquities director Maamoun Abdul Karim.

As the conflict escalated, volunteers did their best to preserve the Roman and Byzantine-era mosaics from air strikes and shelling, including by heaping sandbags against them.

Some of the mosaics have survived but the museum needs to be rebuilt.

After waves of air strikes prepared the ground for the Syrian ground offensive, the army faced limited resistance as it closed in on Maaret Al-Numan last week.

The extremist and rebel forces that controlled the town eventually pulled back to regroup in some of the other towns in their ever-shrinking Idlib bastion, home to around three million people.

"Sweeping operations are over and workshops will soon be opened to start rehabilitating the town's infrastructure, so that civilians can come back," Marahesh says.



The ongoing operation in Idlib province has displaced 388,000 people since December, with most retreating to areas closer to the Turkish border.



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Russian strikes kill 10 civilians in Syria's Idlib: monitor  
Syrian troops capture key town in rebel-held Idlib province

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## [Oman advises against travel to China due to coronavirus outbreak](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1580461997608327500

Fri, 2020-01-31 09:08

DUBAI: Oman's health ministry on Friday advised against travel to China because of the coronavirus outbreak.

"It is advisable not to travel to China unless it is absolutely necessary," the ministry said in a Twitter posting.



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Pakistan halts China flights amid coronavirus outbreak

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## [\*\*OIC rights' body rejects Trump's Middle East peace plan\*\*](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-01-30 23:19

JEDDAH: A human rights body at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has rejected US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

His plan includes a Palestinian state and the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over West Bank settlements. The US leader said Jerusalem would remain Israel's "undivided" capital, but that the Palestinian capital would "include areas of East Jerusalem."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it the "deal of the century."

Trump's plan has been rejected by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas, which rules Gaza.

The OIC's Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) said that a peace initiative would only succeed when it followed the "inalienable right to self-determination" of Palestinians guaranteed by international law and UN resolutions. Any peace process needed to have the full involvement of the Palestinians, who were the aggrieved party, it added.

It reiterated its view that any unilateral act to alter the demographic, geographic and historical status of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) not only contravened international law including the Fourth Geneva Convention, it would go against several UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council Resolutions, which affirmed the status of Al-Quds as an occupied territory under Israel since 1967.

The commission welcomed statements from the UN and the OIC, giving its full support to a two- state solution that must help Palestinians to establish their own independent, viable and contiguous state in pre-1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital including their "unquestionable right" to return to their homes and property, as decided in UN resolutions and guaranteed by international law.





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## [UAE has 'nothing to worry about' regarding coronavirus, says health ministry](#)

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Thu, 2020-01-30 23:12

LONDON: People living in the UAE have “nothing to worry about” regarding cases of coronavirus and should be wary of false information spread on social media, the emirates’ health ministry said on Thursday.

When contacted by Arab News, the health ministry reiterated the message given by Dr. Hussein Abdel Rahman Al-Rand who said four patients – a Chinese family made up of four members visiting the UAE – were in a stable condition and

were receiving treatment at hospitals, adding there was no reason to worry.

The assistant undersecretary for health centers and clinics sector at the ministry also advised citizens and residents "to be careful of tendentious rumors being spread through social media."

Al-Rand, who is also the chairman of the National Committee for Implementation of International Health Regulations and Fight Against Pandemics, said: "As I mentioned, the situation is stable, and there is nothing to worry about, everyone should carry on with their lives normally."

Al-Rand assured parents that it was safe to send children to schools, as well as visiting malls and workplaces as usual.

"The health situation is excellent for sending children to school, there were no cases recorded for the coronavirus in UAE schools.

"Epidemiological Investigation Centers at the Health Ministry and other institutes are working around the clock to record any new cases diagnosed," he said.

"UAE airports have taken precautionary measures by installing thermal sensors as well as using a guide for passengers coming from China that provides their contact details in cases of emergency or if they showed any symptoms of the coronavirus. They have to record that at any health centers," he added.

Al-Rand also used his video message to remind citizens and residents of the UAE to take information only from official sources and through contacting affiliated information centers.





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