

12 killed in Baghdad square as assailants fire live rounds

Fri, 2019-12-06 21:39

BAGHDAD: Iraqi officials say 12 people have been killed in Baghdad's Khilani Square after unknown assailants fired live ammunition from cars. Security and medical officials say at least two of the dead were policeman.

Protesters fearing for their lives ran from the plaza to nearby Tahrir Square and mosques to take cover. Protesters are occupying part of Jumhuriya, Sinak and Ahar bridges in a standoff with security forces. All bridges lead to or near the heavily-fortified Green Zone, the seat of Iraq's government.

The attacks come one day after a string of suspicious stabbing incidents left at least 13 wounded in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, the epicenter of Iraq's leaderless protest movement.

The attacks by unknown perpetrators occurred as demonstrators supporting political parties and Iran-backed militias withdrew from the Square on Thursday evening.

The incidents fueled paranoia among protesters, who immediately implemented self security measures to uncover saboteurs within the square.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)
[Baghdad](#)

Iraq revolution will be dramatized, written, read, and painted
Mortars hit Iraq's Balad air base

Huge protest days ahead of contentious Algeria vote

Author:

Amal BELALLOUFI | AFP

ID:

1575652212363894900

Fri, 2019-12-06 17:07

ALGIERS: A vast crowd rallied in Algiers on the final Friday before a contentious presidential election many see as an elite attempt to cling to power despite months of protests, an AFP journalist said.

"No to voting, we swear we will not stop!" protesters chanted. "No retreat!" The poll set for next Thursday will see five candidates linked to ex-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was forced out of office by huge rallies in April, compete for his job.

Two of the approved runners even served as prime ministers during the ex-strongman's two-decade tenure.

In the absence of an official tally, it was impossible to estimate the size of Friday's mobilization.

But it appeared to be the biggest rally since November 1, when citizens took to the streets and demanded a second "liberation" on the 65th anniversary of the start of the war for independence from France.

Protesters on Friday also shouted their support for a general strike set for Sunday and demanded civilian – rather than "military" – rule.

Since Bouteflika stepped down, army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah has emerged as the country's de facto ruler.

A firm and consistent proponent of elections, the army chief on Tuesday called for a massive turnout in the poll, slamming what he dubbed detractors' "plotting against the fatherland."

But the crowds on Friday shouted a sharp rebuke: "Gaid Salah, forget the vote!"

Friday marks the 42nd consecutive week the "Hirak" protest movement has organized marches across the country.

"I am not against voting (per se), I am against this election because it is only serving to recycle Bouteflika figures," said Fatiha Bendahmane.

Former prime ministers Ali Benflis, 75, and Abdelmadjid Tebboune, 73, are considered the frontrunners in the presidential vote.

Three other figures who either participated in Bouteflika-era governments or supported the former strongman have also been cleared to run.

“We will have a new name but the same policies that destroyed the economy of this country,” said Bendamane, a 55-year-old teacher preparing to demonstrate in Algiers.

“I will march today to say no to voting with this regime.”

Checkpoints outside the capital were only letting in vehicles registered in Algiers, an AFP correspondent reported on Friday morning.

Busloads of plain-clothed and anti-riot police were deployed to the city center, equipped with water cannons.

According to Amnesty International, Algerian authorities have “escalated their pre-election crackdown on protests” in recent weeks, “carrying out waves of arbitrary arrests.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Algeria](#)

[Algiers](#)

Algerian protesters scuffle with police as election nears
Algeria tries top figures for corruption as opposed election looms

Washington blacklists Iran-backed Iraqi militia leaders over protests

Fri, 2019-12-06 19:43

WASHINGTON: The United States on Friday blacklisted three Iran-backed Iraqi paramilitary leaders over their alleged role in killings of anti-government protesters in Iraq, the US Treasury Department said.

They are the latest US sanctions to target Iraqi individuals or armed groups with close links to Tehran as Washington ramps up economic pressure to try to counter Iranian influence in the Middle East.

The sanctions target Qais Al-Khazali, leader of the Asaib Ahl Al-Haq Iran-backed militia and his brother Laith Al-Khazali, another leader of the group.

They also target Hussein Falih Al-Lami, security chief for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iraq's state umbrella group of paramilitary factions, which is dominated by groups backed by Iran, including Asaib.

The Treasury Department said in a statement that groups led by the three paramilitary leaders "opened fire on peaceful protests, killing dozens of innocent civilians." Reuters reported last month that Lami, known also as Abu Zainab Al-Lami, had directed fighters to open fire on protesters.

Iraqi paramilitary groups deny any role in the deaths of protesters, who have demonstrated against the government for more than two months. Security forces have killed more than 400 mostly unarmed protesters, police and medics say.

The new sanctions also targeted Iraqi businessman Khamis al-Khanjar for alleged corruption, the statement said.

The sanctions freeze any US assets held by the leaders and prohibit Americans from doing business with them.

Senior US Treasury officials said the violent crackdown on protests was "causing even more political instability."

"Iraqis have a fundamental right to a political process that is free from foreign malign influence and the corruption that both comes with it and fuels it," one of the officials said.

They said the militia leaders had been involved in forced disappearances and abductions of activists.

Iran-backed armed groups and politicians have dominated Iraq's state institutions since a US-led invasion in 2003 that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, plunged the country into years of civil war and destroyed infrastructure.

Iraqi protesters say the groups that dominate the government have kept people poor and jobless through corruption and failed to repair the country despite two years of relative calm after the defeat of Daesh.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi said last week he would quit.

Asked about whether sanctions were designed to distance the militia leaders from the process of forming a new government, one of the Treasury officials said: "The timing is quite deliberate... Iraq's people are demanding a government that is free and clear of foreign interference."

Tension between Washington and Tehran has ramped up as US President Donald Trump's administration blames Iran for a series of attacks on oil infrastructure in the Gulf and bases hosting US troops in Iraq. Iran denies

involvement in the attacks.

Iraqi paramilitaries have in turn accused the United States and Israel of attacks on their own installations.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[US](#)

[Iraq](#)

[Iraq protests](#)

Iraq's Sistani says new PM must be chosen without foreign interference

[Pompeo visits Morocco in first since Trump election](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1575576786316988200

Thu, 2019-12-05 20:10

RABAT: Top US diplomat Mike Pompeo visited Morocco on Thursday, the highest-ranking American official to travel there since the election of President Donald Trump.

Pompeo met his Moroccan counterpart Nasser Bourita to discuss the "threat" posed by Iran's attempts to "broaden its regional influence," as well as the conflicts in Libya and unrest across the Sahel region, Bourita said in a statement.

The State Department has called Morocco an "essential partner" in Washington's broader diplomatic strategy, which includes normalization of ties between Arab countries and Israel.

The visit followed Israeli media reports that the country's officials were hoping for a "breakthrough" in normalizing ties with the North African country in the coming days.

Neither Pompeo nor Moroccan officials made any public mention of such efforts during his visit.

Egypt and Jordan remain the only Arab countries to have peace treaties and formal diplomatic ties with Israel.

"We have a great relationship between our two countries," Pompeo said, as he began his meetings in Rabat. "We make our people safer in each of our two countries."

The trip comes after Pompeo announced last month that the United States no longer considered Jewish settlements in the West Bank to be illegal.

The decision broke with decades of international consensus that the settlements are illegal and a major barrier to peace with the Palestinians.

The king of Morocco last month called for an end to "the policy of colonization in the occupied Palestinian territories" and reiterated his support for a two-state solution.

On Wednesday, Pompeo met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Portugal in talks dominated by policy on their arch-enemy Iran.

Pompeo said they "discussed efforts to counter Iran's destabilising influence in the region, the importance of economic cooperation with regional partners and other issues related to Israel's security."

The US Secretary of State's program was to include an audience with King Mohammed VI, but eventually the meeting was dropped, apparently due to Pompeo's extended stay in Lisbon.

He did however meet Moroccan Interior Minister Abdellatif Hammouchi to discuss counter-terrorism efforts, before leaving for Washington on Thursday evening.





Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Mike Pompeo](#)

[Mortars hit Iraq's Balad air base](#)

Thu, 2019-12-05 22:45

BAGHDAD: Two mortars landed inside Iraq's Balad air base on Thursday, two Iraqi military sources said.

No casualties have been reported in the mortar attack against the air base, said the sources.

Balad base hosts US forces and contractors and is located about 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Baghdad.

On Tuesday, five rockets landed on Ain Al-Asad air base, which hosts US forces in Anbar province in western Iraq without causing any casualties.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)

[balad air base](#)

Pro-paramilitary demonstrators flood Iraqi protest campIran using protest chaos to stockpile ballistic missiles in Iraq