

Lebanon confusion: Uneasy calm descends on Beirut amid 'fear of what is to come'

Thu, 2019-11-21 01:49

BEIRUT: More than a month after bitter demonstrations erupted across the country, Lebanese protesters, just like warriors in battle, appear desperate for a rest.

On Wednesday, 35 days after activists took to the streets to demand an end to government corruption and mismanagement, life in Beirut returned to normal.

Students went back to their schools and universities, banks opened their doors to unprecedented numbers of customers, roadworks restarted on some streets and TV channels resumed regular schedules.

However, behind the appearance of calm, many residents remain nervous and fearful.

Taxi driver Abu Omar said: "The roads are no longer blocked by protesters, but people are still in shock. They fear what is to come. There have been no solutions, which means it is not over."

Madeleine, shopping on Hamra Street with a friend, said: "We have had enough of sitting in front of the TV all day, watching the news. People in the street were right to protest and their demands must be met. Employees were told two days ago that their salaries will be cut in half."

Another said: "We might lose our jobs at any moment. They told us that last month the company suffered enormous losses and might not be able to continue. I do not think that the protests are the cause, but the economic stagnation that began before the protests has got worse."

Away from the capital, protesters are still setting up roadblocks, but the Lebanese army's decision to open major roads between towns has been unopposed.

In the north of Lebanon, roads were blocked in Akkar, while life in Tripoli returned to normal and the main protest squares were closed.

In Saida, in the south of the country, public facilities, schools and universities reopened. But protesters called for money exchange and transfer shops to be closed amid anger at the outlets' high pricing of the US dollar while banks still have strict limits on providing customers with US currency.

According to a final review by Lebanon's Central Bank, more than \$3.2 billion was withdrawn from banks at the start of the financial crisis.

Alia Abbas, general director of economy and trade at the Lebanese Economy

Ministry, said that prices of some products have risen by up to 11 percent.

President Michel Aoun, caretaker prime minister Saad Hariri and Speaker Nabih Berri have failed to reach a formula to form a new government since Oct. 29.

One activist, who declined to be named, said that he fears Aoun will name someone other than Hariri to form a government of both experts and politicians since the former PM is insisting on a technocrat government.

“Naming Hariri to form a techno-political government is a good thing, as familiar faces will be replaced with experts, but this will not be well received by the protest movement,” he said.



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Lebanon protesters block MPs as street battles erupt
Lebanon is a sinking ship, parliament speaker warns

[Turkey jailing more journalists than any other country: Report](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-11-21 01:40

ANKARA: Turkey jails more journalists than any other country, according to a new report on the status of press freedom there launched by international press freedom groups on Monday.

The report, "Turkey's Journalists in the Dock: The Judicial Silencing of the Fourth Estate," was prepared in collaboration with eight international press freedom and journalism organizations based on their mission visit to Turkey in September during which they met public authorities as well as Turkish civil society groups and journalists.

There are currently 122 journalists behind bars in Turkey, mostly on terrorism-related charges. Those who are released have travel bans. This makes Turkey the top jailer of journalists in the world.

"Critical journalism has been conflated with terrorist propaganda, all part of a campaign to silence opposition voices and close down free speech," the report said, adding that the politically motivated crackdown against the media also severely damaged the rule of law and people's right to access critical and balanced information and news.

The report is the fruit of the collaboration between IPI, ARTICLE 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the European Center for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Norwegian PEN, and PEN International.

The organizations called on Ankara to release all imprisoned journalists, to end the indiscriminate harassment of the press, to review anti-terror and defamation laws, as well as to end political interference in the judiciary.

"The mission recognizes the terrorist threat in Turkey but rejects arguments made by the Supreme Court of Cassation that this justifies exceptional measures outside ECtHR (European Court of Human Rights) jurisprudence and that fundamental freedoms need to be compromised in the name of security. The state's actions clearly demonstrate that the existence of a terrorist threat is being instrumentalized to serve an indiscriminate crackdown on critical voices," the report said.

BACKGROUND

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The latest legislative changes restricting online broadcasting are also criticized in the report as an attempt by the state to regulate all online activities.

The problems in the accreditation of journalists and the government-regulated system of issuing press cards was another point of criticism. Over the past three years, thousands of applications were rejected by officials, while

hundreds of press cards were removed over alleged security reasons. This is seen as a move to restrict the work of foreign correspondents in the country.

“The increased use of travel bans to harass journalists and activists, including their family, is a further area of concern. After the lifting of the state of emergency in 2018, the authorities have continued to seize and hold the passports of individuals that oppose or are perceived to oppose the government,” the report said.

In September, two Turkish journalists from US-based Bloomberg News faced up to five years in prison over a financial report about the country’s economic problems.

On Nov. 12, Ahmet Altan, a well-known novelist and journalist who was released from prison only a week before, after being detained for more than three years, was taken back into custody.

Scott Griffen, deputy director at the International Press Institute (IPI), a global network of journalists and editors defending media freedom since 1950, said that independent journalism and press freedom were under attack in Turkey.

“Although press freedom has been under pressure for years, the current crackdown began with the July 2016 coup attempt and the arrests and prosecution of hundreds of journalists. The situation has not improved since then,” he told Arab News.

According to Griffen, this creates a situation not only in which journalists are deprived of their freedom, but also in which many journalists are forced to self-censor to avoid personal, professional and legal consequences.

Under a mainstream media environment that is almost totally under governmental control, Griffen thinks that there is still room for alternative news options in Turkey.

“Many journalists who lost their jobs after their media outlets were bought by pro-government figures are now working for alternative online media or have found a home with foreign media. Up until now, they have represented one of the last remaining sources of free expression in Turkey and reflect a demand among the public for independent news,” he said.

But, Griffen added, as long as these media are doing their role of scrutinizing the government, it makes them a target.

As Turkey is bound by the European Convention on Human Rights, by its own constitution on freedom of expression as well as the case law of the European Court of Human Rights on the application of anti-terror laws, Griffen also noted that courts and prosecutors are not respecting the constitution.

“Turkish officials have claimed to us that the country faces a unique terror threat that justifies a state of exception from international law and standards on freedom of expression. But the case law of the European Court of Human Rights is fully capable of handling this problem, it is simply not

being applied by the courts in Turkey,” he said.

“Only speech that directly incites violence or acts of terror should face criminal sanction under anti-terrorism law. But Turkey’s justice system is abusing anti-terror law to punish dissent, in disregard of all international standards,” he said.



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US consular staff in Turkey quizzed over video that ‘mocked Islam’ Turkey:
About 100,000 Syrians left Istanbul since early July

[Israel closes Palestinian organisations in Jerusalem](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2019-11-20 20:11

JERUSALEM: Israeli authorities closed several Palestinian organisations in Jerusalem Wednesday, including a television channel, an Israeli minister and

officials from the organisations said.

The offices of Palestine TV – a channel funded by the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority – and an office of the Palestinian ministry of education were given orders to close for six months, staff members said on condition of anonymity.

The director of the al-Araz production company that hosts Palestine TV was temporarily arrested, while a correspondent for the channel was summoned for questioning, these Palestinian sources said.

Israel's Public Security minister Gilad Erdan confirmed the closure of offices used by Palestine TV and the education ministry.

Israel captured east Jerusalem in a 1967 war and considers the entire city its undivided capital.

The Palestinians consider the eastern part of the city the capital of their own future state.

"I will continue to pursue a firm policy against any attempt by the Palestinian Authority to violate our sovereignty in the capital," Erdan said in a statement seeking to justify the closures.

He accused Palestine TV of producing anti-Israeli content in which the country is presented as "responsible for war crimes and ethnic cleansing."

The Palestinians condemned the closures.

"This is a continuation of the Israeli government's campaign against everything Palestinian in occupied Jerusalem," senior official Hanan Ashrawi said.

MADA, a Palestinian organisation that defends freedom of expression, said the closures were "part of Israel's efforts to silence the media and prevent the Palestinian story from spreading, through a series of repressions against the media and journalists."



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Palestinian journalists protest wounding of colleague
Palestinian killed in clashes on anniversary of Yasser Arafat's death

[Iraq political deal hands Abdul Mahdi a reprieve in face of mass protests](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-11-20 03:16

BAGHDAD: Iraq's political forces have signed an agreement that will allow the government of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and the current Parliament to continue to operate until the end of the year. In return, they have pledged to implement a number of demands issued by protesters, including a crackdown on corruption, amendments to the electoral law, changes to the Independent

High Electoral Commission and a comprehensive ministerial reshuffle within 45 days, political leaders involved in the talks said on Tuesday.

However, the announcement of the deal, late on Monday, was criticized by protesters as an attempt by the political forces to give themselves some breathing space in the hope that the protests will run out of steam.

Widespread anti-government demonstrations began in Baghdad and nine Shiite-dominated southern provinces at the start of October. Since then, more than 300 people have been killed and 15,000 injured, mainly in Baghdad, by bullets and tear gas canisters during efforts by Abdul Mahdi's government and its allies to suppress the unrest.

Protesters first took to the streets on Oct. 1 demanding action to address corruption, high unemployment and a lack of basic daily services and amenities. This prompted a brutal crackdown by Abdul Mahdi and his Iran-backed armed allies, during which 147 people were killed and more than 6,000 injured. This temporarily halted the demonstrations but protesters returned to the streets on Oct. 24, after domestic and international pressure led to a pledge from security forces that they would not use live ammunition against demonstrators.

When the demonstrations resumed, protesters added a number of new demands, including the resignation of Abdul Mahdi's government, changes to election law, early national parliamentary elections, and the formation of a new electoral commission.

Key Iraqi political forces, especially those backed by Iran, subsequently agreed to meet the demands of the demonstrators, with the exception of the resignation or removal of Abdul Mahdi and the holding of early elections. However, growing internal pressure from the supreme religious authority in Najaf, led by Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Al-Sistani, international pressure from the United Nations and other diplomatic missions in Baghdad, and the high number of fatalities plus an increase in kidnappings and arrests of activists and journalists forced them to reconsider the demands they had rejected.

The political factions signed a written agreement late on Monday, after weeks of intensive meetings, stating that they will meet most of the demands of protesters within 45 days. If they fail to do so by Jan. 1, the government will be dismissed and preparations will begin for early elections, politicians said.

Arab News has seen the agreement, which was prepared and signed by leaders of the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish political alliances. It includes a number of "recommendations," the most important of which are to "preserve the structure of the state and its democratic political system, and deepen the principle of peaceful transfer of power through constitutional mechanisms."

BACKGROUND

- Widespread anti-government demonstrations began in Baghdad and nine Shiite-dominated southern provinces at the start of October.

As part of the obligation on Parliament and the government to implement the demands of the demonstrators within 45 days, a special court must be set up

to deal with allegations of corruption and prosecute the guilty, regardless of political positions and affiliations.

Iraq ranks high on the list of the most corrupt countries. The political power-sharing system in the country, which has been in place since 2004, has contributed to the spread of financial and administrative corruption in all ministries and government institutions, and has helped to protect those involved in it.

The signed agreement also states that "political forces are committed to upholding court decisions and not covering up for corrupt officials." They have pledged not to interfere in the work of ministries and state institutions, and to work on legislation and legal amendments designed to improve the political system and meet the demands of the protesters. Changes to election laws and the Independent High Electoral Commission, including the removal of current commission members, are among the proposed legal amendments. In addition a law will be introduced to abolish the special privileges currently granted to senior politicians and officials.

The agreement states: "Political leaders express their full commitment and follow-up to these steps, and if the Parliament or the government is unable to achieve their tasks ... within the agreed times (45 days), they (the prime minister and the speaker of the Parliament) are obliged to move, through their blocs in the Parliament, to alternative constitutional options to meet the demands of the people, by withdrawing confidence from the government or conducting early elections."

The agreement was widely criticized by demonstrators and observers, who viewed it as the latest ruse by political groups to buy themselves some time in the hope that the protesters will despair and give up.

"What is contained in this agreement is an attempt to circumvent the demands of millions of demonstrators, and has nothing to do with their demands," said Mohammed Al-Shimary, one of the protesters. "Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish political forces have given Abdul Mahdi everything he needs to legitimize his repression of the demonstrations, and keep their own privileges and thefts.

"This agreement will not (persuade the protesters to give up) and any reasonable person knows for sure that what they have pledged could not be fulfilled in years, let alone 45 days.

"They are playing with fire and will pay for it soon."



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Iraqi protesters block commercial ports, split capital

[Two Daesh-supporting suspects in Turkey blacklisted by US](#)

Wed, 2019-11-20 02:25

ANKARA: The US Treasury Department has blacklisted two Turkey-based procurement agents helping Daesh and four companies linked to the terror group operating in Syria, Turkey, across the Gulf and Europe by providing logistical and financial support.

The move is linked to government efforts to eliminate and sanction the remaining financial and recruiting networks keeping Daesh alive in the Middle East.

The targets have been chosen in line with US Executive Order 13224, intended to identify terrorists and those who have materially helped or supported them, or offered them financial, material, or technological support.

On the list, Sahloul Money Exchange Company's transfers of thousands of dollars to Daesh operatives in Turkey in 2016 were revealed.

The company was also holding deposits from Daesh-linked people trying to reach Turkey from Syria.

The Turkey-based Ismail and Ahmet Bayaltun brothers are also identified on the list by their material assistance and equipment support for Daesh fighters through their export-import company ACL Ithalat & Ihracat in Sanliurfa, a city just across Turkey-Syrian border.

Some Turkish news outlets had reported four years ago the company's suspicious procurement of aluminum pigments used for producing bombs.

The Turkish company was believed to send this material to Daesh networks in Syria.

Ismail Bayaltun was taken into custody in June 2015 over the reports that Daesh fighters received freight shipments from Turkey that were sent with "Bayaltun" inscribed on the packages.

Just a month later, Daesh carried out a bloody suicide bomb attack in Suruc, in the southeastern Sanliurfa province, where a total of 34 people were killed and 70 were seriously injured.

The report said that all property and interests in the possession of Ismail Bayaltun in the US or that are in the control or possession of US persons are blocked and should be reported to the Treasury Department.

"Persons that engage in certain transactions with the individual designated today may themselves be exposed to sanctions or subject to an enforcement action," the report underlined.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The move is linked to government efforts to eliminate and sanction the remaining financial and recruiting networks keeping Daesh alive in the Middle East.
- The Turkey-based Ismail and Ahmet Bayaltun brothers are identified in the list by their material assistance and equipment support for Daesh fighters.

The siblings, the No.1 suspects in the report, still have public social media accounts.

Their blacklisted outfit is registered as an electronic equipment and materials company, and they also claim to produce industrial equipment. According to Colin Clarke, an expert on terror financing networks with the Soufan Group, the recent moves by the US Treasury against companies and individuals linked to Daesh is a positive development, but in no way will

this eradicate the financial and logistical sources of the group.

“We are likely to see Daesh focus even more on raising, storing, transferring and laundering funds in order to keep its operational capabilities robust,” Clarke told Arab News, adding: “The US will need to cooperate with a range of stakeholders, including both countries in the region and private sector entities to continue to identify and track Daesh movements of money.”

More than 300 people have lost their lives in Daesh-claimed attacks in Turkey.



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Over 600 Daesh affiliates surrender to Afghan forces
Germany arrests woman, accused of joining Daesh, on return home