

Revealed: How Iran led brutal suppression of Baghdad protests

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Wed, 2019-10-23 19:55

BAGHDAD: The toll of dead and injured in protests this month in Iraq was so high because security services used “excessive force” and live ammunition without official authority, a damning report on the demonstrations has concluded.

At least 150 were killed and more than 7,000 injured in six days of protests in Baghdad and eight Shiite-dominated southern provinces against corruption, unemployment and non-functioning public services.

Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi set up a committee 10 days ago to investigate the high casualty rate and identify who was responsible. Its report, disclosed to Arab News on Wednesday, says the security forces’ response was excessive, “which led to an increase in the number of victims.”

The investigation found that authorities gave no official orders for security forces to fire live ammunition, but the report recommends that 45 senior military commanders and officers be dismissed for “losing command and control over their forces,” and that others be referred to the courts “for involvement in firing against demonstrators.”

Nevertheless, the investigative committee’s report was condemned on Wednesday as a whitewash because it scapegoats military officers who are not viewed as loyal to Iran, and it does not name the two men who actually directed the suppression of the protests. They are Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the powerful Iranian military leader who commands the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) of Iran-backed armed factions.

“The report is a farce, and worthless,” a prominent Shiite adviser told Arab News. “Any report that does not reveal the identity of the snipers who killed the demonstrators in cold blood, does not mention those who gave explicit orders to kill, and ignores the names of the real killers, has no value.”

Another critic said the report was flawed for “deliberately omitting to mention many facts, and presenting a number of police commanders and officers who are not pro-Iran as a scapegoat to cover up those who are actually responsible for the massacre.”

Iraqi security officials have told Arab News how the operation to police the protests was hijacked by Iranian operatives – initially by Al-Muhandis, an Iraqi-born Iranian citizen who is wanted by the US and other countries for

his involvement in the bombing of the US and French embassies in Kuwait in 1984, and later by Soleimani himself.

Before the protests began, Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi formed a special "crisis unit" of senior government ministers, military leaders and security chiefs. Its aim was "to manage the demonstrations, secure Baghdad, secure government headquarters and diplomatic missions, and prepare for the worst-case scenario – the overthrow of the Shiite-led regime," sources told Arab News.

However, the unit, which met at the federal police headquarters in Baghdad throughout the protests, was subordinate to the orders of Al-Muhandis. "He was the one who led the operation throughout the days of demonstrations, and he was the one who drafted the Baghdad security plan," a senior national security official told Arab News.

"For the first two days, he worked with Hamed Abdollahi, commander of the Quds Force special operations unit," the official said. "On the third day, Qasem Soleimani arrived to take the lead himself.

"Abdul Mahdi did not attend all the meetings, but he visited from time to time to see the latest developments."

Al-Muhandis is widely viewed as Iran's most powerful operative in Iraq, and the man to whom most of the Iranian-backed armed factions owe total loyalty. He enjoys the absolute confidence of Soleimani, to the extent that the Quds Force commander stays at Al-Muhandis's home when he is in Iraq.

The plan proposed by Al-Muhandis for controlling the protests was similar to the plan for securing Damascus for Bashar Assad when it was threatened by the Syrian opposition. It required dividing Baghdad into up to 19 sectors, separated by roadblocks preventing movement from one to another, with troops in each sector reinforced by snipers "to prevent the arrival of protesters ... and to spread terror among them," three sources familiar with the plan told Arab News. He also ordered attacks on the studios of TV news channels to try to prevent footage of the protests being broadcast, along with a campaign to arrest journalists and activists.

"Al-Muhandis did not explicitly say, 'Kill the protesters.' I did not hear him at least, but he clearly said that you should treat the demonstrators as warriors," a military commander who attended several meetings of the crisis unit told Arab News.

"How would any security or military commander understand this? How would he translate it? Of course, by shooting live ammunition and resorting to lethal force."

Soleimani – referred to as "the general" by Iraqi security commanders and "Hajj" by pro-Iranian politicians – arrived at Baghdad International Airport on the third day of the protests. He was accompanied by a group of up to 30 Iranian and Lebanese "advisers," all young men dressed in black – T-shirt, pants, sneakers and a black sports hat – and carrying backpacks. There was no

insignia on their clothing to indicate who they were working with.

The group arrived on three separate flights and were taken from the airport in vehicles belonging to the PMC.

“Soleimani came to protect Abdel Mahdi, who represents the regime for him,” a prominent Shiite government adviser close to the prime minister told Arab News. “He said it frankly, he protected Bashar Assad in Syria for 10 years and will protect Abdul Mahdi to the end, even if it costs him his life.”

The deadly suppression of the protests, and the political crisis in their aftermath, has revealed the full extent of the control exercised by Iran and its operatives over Abdul Mahdi and his senior staff, security officials, government advisers and politicians told Arab News.

The brutality of the crackdown in Baghdad, and the Iraqi government’s denial that it deployed snipers or ordered the deliberate killing of protesters, have raised questions about who has the power and the ability to take to the street in full view of the security authorities and carry out executions.

Forensic medical examinations indicate that most of the dead suffered direct head and chest injuries, confirming reports by witnesses and video evidence obtained by Arab News of executions, shots fired by masked gunmen in black uniforms, snipers in tall buildings overlooking the demonstrations and protesters being chased into alleyways, where they were shot in the head from a distance of less than a meter.

Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Al-Sistani, the leader of the world’s Shiite community and the most influential man in Iraq, has expressed dissatisfaction with Abdul Mahdi’s performance. He has condemned excessive violence against the protesters, demanded the identification of their killers, and “is not convinced by the results of the investigation and does not accept them,” according to a source in Najaf, the ayatollah’s power center.

Al-Sistani’s displeasure suggests that the prime minister will not stay in office for long, and that a decision had been made to remove him.

“It’s done,” a close source to the ayatollah told Arab News. “Abdul Mahdi will not be able to provide any satisfactory solutions, and even if he did, it is too late.

“There will inevitably be chaos, and the talk in Najaf now is about how to contain it. Removing Abdul Mahdi is not the real solution, but it will reduce the damage.”



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Iran-backed militias deployed snipers during Iraq protests
Iran says US blame over Iraq protests 'astonishing'

[More than 100 Daesh prisoners have escaped in Syria: US envoy](#)

Wed, 2019-10-23 17:58

WASHINGTON: More than 100 prisoners of the extremist Daesh movement have escaped in Syria in the chaos since Turkey's incursion, a senior US official said Wednesday.

"We would say the number is now over 100. We do not know where they are," James Jeffrey, the State Department pointman on Syria, told the House Foreign

Affairs Committee when asked about the detainees.

Turkey launched a military operation in Syria after President Donald Trump agreed to pull US troops who were allied with the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led group that bore the brunt of the fight against Daesh. Jeffrey said that the Kurdish fighters were still guarding prisoners from the extremist group, despite their warnings that they will need to devote resources to fight Turkey instead.

“Almost all of the prisons that the SDF were guarding are still secured. The SDF still has people there,” Jeffrey said.

“We are monitoring that as best we can. We still have people in Syria working with the SDF and one of those priorities is these prisons,” he said.

The Kurdish fighters have pulled out of a key border area as part of a US-brokered agreement with Turkey to end the offensive.

Turkey links the Syrian Kurdish fighters to PKK separatists at home, who are considered a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union.



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Russian forces deploy at Syrian border under new accord Syria's Al-Assad vows support for Kurds against Turkey assault

In Egypt, 7 dead after chaotic day of heavy rains, flooding

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1571841942308560200

Wed, 2019-10-23 14:32

CAIRO: At least seven people, including three children, were killed in Egypt's Nile Delta and Sinai regions, authorities said Wednesday after heavy rains pummeled Cairo and other parts of the country the previous day, causing massive traffic jams and flooding many key roads.

People captured images of Tuesday's downpours and flooding on their mobile phones, posting footage on social media, including scenes of cars submerged by flood waters.

In one dramatic video, a man on a bulldozer pulls the lifeless body of a little girl out of the water in a flooded area in the northern province of Sharqia as shouts and screams are heard in the background. Another video shows a policeman, steps away from the presidential palace in Cairo's district of Heliopolis, wading into a flooded street to unclog a sewage drain.

Authorities closed schools and universities in the greater Cairo area Wednesday and companies saw only skeletal staff show up at work after Tuesday's heavy rains.

The mayhem raised questions about Cairo's ability to deal with heavy rainfall as the city's infrastructure and sewage and drainage systems have suffered from years of poor maintenance.

Prime Minister Mustafa Madbouly said Wednesday's school closures were limited to the greater Cairo area, including Giza and Qalioubia, as more rainfall was expected in the next couple of days, according to the country's weather service.

Five deaths occurred in the Nile Delta provinces of Sharqia, Gharbia and Kafr el-Sheikh, according to the Interior Ministry. Three of the victims, including two children, were fatally electrocuted. The other two victims died falling from the rooftops of their flooded homes.

Local authorities in northern Sinai also reported two deaths. Moataz Taher, head of the el-Hassana municipality, said in a statement that a 47-year-old farmer and his 13-year-old daughter died early Wednesday in the flooding. Cairo's eastern suburb of Nasr City was hit the hardest, as well as Heliopolis, located near Cairo's international airport. The government said the two suburbs had received at least 650,000 cubic meters of precipitation in just 90 minutes on Tuesday, overwhelming the city's sewage and drain systems.

Trucks fanned out across Cairo to drain water from flooded areas. A key highway connecting Cairo to other provinces was closed, the state-run Al-Ahram daily reported.

EgyptAir said it had delayed some flights on Tuesday because passengers were stuck on the roads and unable to get to the airport. A part of the old Cairo airport terminal which has been under renovation was also flooded, with footage on social media showing rainwater pouring into the hallway. The Civil Aviation Ministry said that terminal was only being used by a private carrier for one or two flights a day and shared photos of it after it was cleaned up.







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Heavy rain across Cairo cause chaos as residents use bulldozer to escape floods
Egypt arrests 22 for planned protest over grisly murder case

[Ankara accuses Tehran of betrayal: Is the alliance of convenience collapsing?](#)

Tue, 2019-10-22 23:53

ANKARA: Recent developments on the ground in Syria may be proof of the demise of the already fragile partnership between Turkey and Iran, the two guarantor states of the Astana process alongside with Russia. On Monday, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi announced that Iran rejected any move from Turkey to establish military posts inside Syria, and emphasized that the integrity of Tehran's key regional ally should be respected. Prior to departing for Sochi, to meet with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: "I condemn Iran's stance on Operation Peace Spring. Unfortunately, there are splintering voices rising from Iran. This situation disturbs my colleagues and myself."

Erdogan also accused Iran of betraying the consensus between the two countries, after Tehran condemned Turkey's ongoing operation in northern Syria against Syrian Kurdish forces and demanded "an immediate stop to the attacks and the exit of the Turkish military from Syrian territory." The statements are considered by experts another sign that the alliance of convenience between the two regional competitors is ending, with their regional interests beginning to conflict.

Iran has always been a close ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, and has been keen to engage Syrian Kurds, Assad's government and Turkey in dialogue following Ankara's offensive into northern Syria, within the framework of the Adana Agreement as a legal framework to establish security along the border. Tehran also held surprise military drills near the Turkish border on the same day Turkey launched its operation into northern Syria.

Dr. Michael Tanchum, senior fellow at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Studies, said: "With the removal of US troops in northern Syria, which both Ankara and Tehran opposed for different reasons, Turkey and Iran's conflicting strategic interests are now naturally coming to the forefront." Moreover, according to Tanchum, Iran has already fought elements of the paramilitary forces now that are now partnering with Turkey.

"Tehran is distressed that such elements are being empowered. While Iran needs Turkish cooperation in the face crippling US sanctions, Iran needs Russia's cooperation much more," he told Arab News.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi says Iran rejected any move from Turkey to establish military posts inside Syria, and emphasized that the integrity of Tehran's key regional ally should be respected.
- Iran has already fought the elements of the paramilitary forces that are now partnering with Turkey.

However, Tanchum thinks that the idea Tehran would triangulate between Ankara and Moscow as a way of preserving its own position in Syria seems quite unlikely.

"If Iran has to choose between Turkey and Russia in Syria, it will choose Russia. In this sense, the previous dynamics of the Astana process are no longer in place," he said.

However, Dr. Bilgehan Alagoz, lecturer at Istanbul Marmara University's Institute for Middle East Studies, said that rumors about the death of the Iranian-Turkish alliance in Syria may be a bit exaggerated, at least for now. For Alagoz, Iran is hesitant about cooperation between Turkey and the US, which has the possibility of creating a confrontation against Iran's interests in Syria.

"On the other hand, Iran is uncomfortable with the US military presence in Syria. Therefore, Iran is facing a dilemma," she told Arab News.

According to Alagoz, at this point Iran needs to pursue diplomacy with both Turkey and Russia.

"Thus, I do not think that the Iranian statements against Turkey will continue for a long time," she added.

With the civil war now in its eighth year in Syria, Assad's forces have gradually gained control of strategic cities in northwestern Idlib province, like Khan Sheikhoun, with Russian and Iranian support. The Syrian regime also attacked Turkish military observation posts in the region over the summer. In the meantime, in a surprise decision on Monday evening, Turkey appointed former Halkbank executive Hakan Atilla, who was sentenced to prison in the US over Iranian sanctions breaches, as the new CEO of the Istanbul Stock Exchange.



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From the virtual world to the real world: How Lebanese youth's online revolution powered street protests
Erdogan hails 'historic agreement' with Putin over Syria

[From the virtual world to the real world: How Lebanese youth's online revolution powered street protests](#)

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Tue, 2019-10-22 22:39

BEIRUT: The Lebanese youth revolt against tax increases and corruption began on social media with protests about a proposed levy on WhatsApp, bringing dissent from the virtual world to the real world.

For the first five days of the demonstrations, television images transmitted live to the Lebanese public provided the incentive for people to take to the streets.

On the sixth day, activists reconsidered social media, and WhatsApp has become the most-used platform to transmit live images.

The objection of Lebanese army soldiers to motorcyclists holding the flags of Amal and Hezbollah led to the protest rally in Riad Al-Solh Square in central Beirut on Monday night. This reassured those who were still apprehensive about taking to the street.

The “electronic revolution” is parallel to the revolution on the streets. It is mostly comprised of young people aged 12 and above.

Politicians should talk to these young people using modern means, which is what Prime Minister Saad Hariri has done. On his Twitter account, Hariri tweeted part of his speech after the cabinet meeting: “I will not allow anyone to threaten young demonstrators. Your voice is heard, and if your demand is an early election to make your voice heard, I am with you. You have returned the Lebanese identity to its right place outside any sectarian restriction.”

Activists leading the protests have been devising various forms of electronic attraction to motivate people to take to the street, including a video with the signature “Do you know why?” It includes songs about how to defy injustice, recounting the reasons for the revolution and filing “preliminary” demand papers summarizing the demands of people speaking on the street and in front of the cameras.

The hashtag #down_with_Bank_governor coincided with the move by some activists on Tuesday to the Central Bank of Lebanon to protest against the policy of its governor Riad Salameh. However, the response came through the same electronic means and other applications defending the governor.

Many rumors are circulating on social media, including that the president summoned the TV media for consultation and that there is a fear that the aim is to pressure the owners of the TV stations to stop transmitting live demonstrations to prevent protesters from expressing their opinion.

The most well-known action was that of the sister of the Free Patriotic Movement leader Gebran Bassil resorting to social media to defend President Aoun and her brother.

Dr. Iman Eliwan, a professor of modern media, said that young Lebanese view social media as their “only platform of expression, and touching it ignited the first spark of the protests. And resorting to it during the protests aimed at activating ‘networking’ to prevent any possibility of laxity and to remain united using one language.”

And whether the absence of a unified reference for the movement is caused by this “networking,” she said: “It is possible that there may be group leaders on social media, and they consider these platforms as their strength.”

Eliwan added: "These young people express deep anger and this happens at their age. We used to say that they belonged to the Sofa Party. But they went down to the streets. They control the streets. Maybe they are marginalized in their homes and in their communities."

Asked if these online revolutions have achieved any results, she said: "It has not reached anywhere in the experiences that we have seen in the Arab world. It can ignite the spark and activate the movement, but the horizon of this movement is deadlocked."



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PM Hariri's office says foreign governments back Lebanon reform goals
Citizens accuse Lebanon's Hezbollah of aiding government to 'rob their livelihoods'