

Yazidi family abandons EU dream, reluctantly returns to Iraq

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DOHUK, Iraq: Khari Hasan Kalo peered out of the window of the repatriation flight as it touched down in northern Iraq.

It's a place he and his family had hoped never to see again after they left for Belarus two months ago, driven by dreams of a new life in Europe.

Kalo, 35, had begged for loans and spent his savings on the ill-fated journey to the Belarusian capital of Minsk, the first stop on a journey to the West. His wife, 30-year-old Zena, had sold her few belongings on the gamble that left the family of six stranded for days in a cold forest on the border of Belarus and Poland. In the end, they returned home, fearing they were endangering the life of Kalo's ailing 80-year-old mother.

Yet they say they would do it all again to escape their hopeless life, spent in a camp for displaced persons for the past seven years. The Kalos are Yazidis, a religious minority that was brutalized by Daesh militants when they overran northern Iraq in 2014.

Years after their lives were torn apart, Yazidis are still unable to return home or locate hundreds of women and children who had been snatched by the extremists. The Kalos' home lies in ruins.

"If it wasn't for my children and my mother, I would never have returned, I would have stayed in that forest at all costs rather than return to this tent," Kalo said Friday, speaking to AP from the Karbato camp in Dohuk province in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region.

His mother, looking frail, slept throughout the interview.

The Kalos, including three children ages 5, 7, and 9, had returned from Belarus a day earlier.

"It's not even our tent; it's his sister's," his wife interjected. "It's no place to raise children, have a life."

The region is considered the most stable part of conflict-scarred Iraq, yet Iraqi Kurds made up a large group among thousands of migrants from the Middle East who had flown to Belarus since the summer. Even in Iraq's more prosperous north, growing unemployment and corruption is fueling migration, and the Yazidi community has endured particular hardship.

On Thursday, hundreds of Iraqis returned home from Belarus after abandoning their hopes of reaching the European Union. The repatriation came after thousands of migrants became stuck at the Poland-Belarus border amid rising tensions between the two countries.

Kalo's family was among 430 people who flew from Minsk back to Iraq, where 390 got off at Irbil International Airport before the flight continued to Baghdad.

The West has accused Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of using the migrants as pawns to destabilize the EU in retaliation for its sanctions

imposed on his authoritarian regime following a harsh crackdown on internal dissent. Belarus denies engineering the crisis, which has seen migrants entering the country since summer, lured by easy tourist visas, and then trying to cross into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, all EU members. Kalo didn't mind if a geopolitical game was being played at his expense if it got his family out of Iraq.

"So what if I was a pawn in someone's hands if it gets me to Germany?" he said.

Since being displaced, the family had gotten increasingly desperate. Their tent burned down in an accidental fire in June that ravaged the Sharia camp, also in Dohuk. They tried to return to their original home in Sinjar but found their house uninhabitable.

He heard from friends about Kurds finding their way to Germany after Belarus eased visa requirements last spring. He begged his brother in Australia to wire him \$9,000 to pay the smugglers' asking price for his wife, three young children and mother.

He also had saved money from his time as a policeman – cash that was hard-won because he endured discrimination as a Yazidi.

"What good is a job if it's still not enough to feed your family?" he said of his decision to quit.

The Kalos took the land route to Istanbul in September, and boarded flights to Minsk the following month. There, they headed straight to the Polish border. With two other Iraqi families, the Kalos dug under the border fence, reaching the other side in darkness.

They walked for four days in search of a GPS point where they were promised a car would meet them and take them straight to Germany.

But that never happened.

Instead, on the fourth day, Kalo's family ran out of food as temperatures dropped in the dense and soggy forest.

Polish authorities found them and sent them back across the border. They were greeted by an encampment of hundreds of migrants. Belarusian authorities were handing out wire cutters and pushing the migrants back through the razor wire.

Polish authorities used water cannons to repel them. But this did not deter Belarusian authorities, who beat and threatened them, Kalo said. He said they shouted: "Go (to) Poland!"

Still, husband and wife fought to stay, agreeing that anything was better than their life in a tent.

But with his mother struggling to survive as conditions grew increasingly squalid, Kalo sought the pity of the Belarusian authorities. They allowed them to return to Minsk to seek medical help.

Kalo heard the Iraqi government had agreed to repatriate citizens free of charge. He turned to his wife and they considered their choices: Return to their desperate lives in Iraq, or bear the responsibility if his mother died. Reluctantly, they put their names on the list.

But their hope is not lost, Kalo said, as his 5-year old daughter, Katarin, dug her face into his chest at the Karbato camp.

"I have two priorities now," he said. "The first (is) to get a tent of our own. The second, to get back on my feet and leave this country. I will make it this time."

He added: "If it was my last day on this Earth, I will spend it trying to

leave.”



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[Time shrinking for Iran nuclear deal, US envoy warns](#)

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Fri, 2021-11-19 16:27

MANAMA: The US envoy for Iran warned Friday that Tehran was approaching the point of no return for reviving a nuclear deal after it boosted its stocks of enriched uranium before talks resume this month.

Robert Malley said Iran risked making it “impossible” to gain any benefit from resuming the agreement, which has been on hold since then president

Donald Trump walked away in 2018.

This week, with Iran set for talks with world powers in Vienna on November 29, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Tehran had again increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

"The time will come if Iran continues at this pace with the advancements they've made, (it) will make it impossible even if we were going to go back to the JCPOA to recapture the benefits," Malley told the Manama Dialogue conference in Bahrain.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was the agreement struck in 2015 under which Iran agreed to clear limits on its nuclear activities in return for an easing of sanctions.

"Iran's advances are spreading alarm across the region... that's what's making the clock tick faster and making all of us say that the time is short for a return to the JCPOA," Malley said.

On Wednesday, the US and its Gulf Arab allies accused Iran of causing a nuclear crisis and destabilising the region with its ballistic missile program and support for armed militias.

Malley said the US shared a "commonality of purpose" with rivals Russia and China "because we want to avoid that crisis, all of us, the crisis that would be sparked if Iran continues on its current path."

"And I want to be clear, because there's no ambiguity about what they seem to be doing now, which is to drag their feet on the nuclear talks and accelerate the progress in their nuclear program."

The US envoy said he was not encouraged by the statements from the new Iranian government of President Ebrahim Raisi, which earlier on Friday accused Washington of conducting a "propaganda campaign" against the country.

"If they stick to their public pronouncements, unfortunately we're not headed in the right direction... but let's wait to see what happens," he said, pledging that President Joe Biden would honor a revived deal.

"Our intent, our clear intent in coming back into the deal is to stick with the deal because we don't want to see a nuclear crisis," Malley said.

Iran had reacted angrily to a US pledge to take its Gulf Arab allies' interests into account in any revived nuclear deal with their arch rival.

"The US government, which is responsible for the current situation after withdrawing from the nuclear deal, is once again trying to provoke a crisis," foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh charged.



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Amnesty calls for release of Iranian rights activist
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[Lebanon PM says information minister will resign soon](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-11-19 22:42

BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati announced on Friday that he will soon call a cabinet session, saying that the situation in the country is “very difficult and the people should not have to deal with more crises.”

His remarks came after protesters stormed the Ministry of Health building in Beirut on Friday morning in opposition to the lifting of subsidies on

medicines, which has caused prices of vital health care treatments to skyrocket.

Arab News learned from a source close to Mikati that Information Minister George Kordahi will submit his resignation from the government during the soon-to-be-held cabinet session. Kordahi's recent statements regarding Saudi Arabia prompted the Kingdom and other Gulf states to cut diplomatic and economic ties with Lebanon.

The Iran-backed Lebanese political group Hezbollah has insisted that Kordahi should not resign to defuse the diplomatic crisis, citing "national sovereignty."

President Michel Aoun recently told a Lebanese military delegation that "Lebanon always seeks better relations with the Arab countries, especially the Gulf."

He added: "We hope that what led to a problem with these countries will be quickly resolved. It is important that the interests of the Lebanese people not be harmed and that they do not pay for what is happening."

In an interview with the Arabic-language daily Al-Akhbar, published on Friday, Aoun said he was not enthusiastic about the information minister being dismissed during the cabinet session, and would prefer that the decision be made personally by Kordahi.

Mikati visited Aoun on Friday morning and informed him of his intention to hold a cabinet session. He then headed to the General Labor Union headquarters, where he announced: "There are over 100 items on the cabinet's agenda, (so we need to hold) a session soon to manage the state's affairs and expedite the public budget and refer it to parliament for approval, in parallel with approving the required reforms (to reach an) agreement with the International Monetary Fund."

Cabinet sessions were suspended less than a month after Mikati formed his government in September, as Hezbollah and the Amal Movement called for the removal of Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the probe into the August 2020 Beirut Port blast, accusing Bitar of "politicizing" the investigation.

Following the deadly clashes between supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement protesting Bitar's handling of the investigation on one side and the Lebanese Armed Forces and unidentified gunmen on the other in Tayouneh on October 14 this year, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement refused to attend cabinet sessions, with Hezbollah claiming the LAF was responsible for the clashes and calling for the arrest of LAF affiliates involved in the incident.

The successive crises have worsened Lebanon's already disastrous economic collapse. The Lebanese pound has continued to lose value; it is currently being traded at 23,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar.

"Lebanon has no choice but to resort to the IMF, and negotiations may last until 2022," Mikati said. "But through the IMF, our country is giving a

certain signal to the world that Lebanon can recover and must be supported.

“The world does not want Lebanon to fall and is ready to help us,” he continued. “And when I say the world, I also mean the Arab countries. But we need to do the required work first. We have hit an unprecedented inflation rate due to the years and years of subsidies, which we can no longer provide since the public treasury is unable to bear it.”

He announced that steps would be taken “at the beginning of December to secure aid for 250,000 families from the World Bank, amounting to \$245 million.” Mikati said the payment process would begin at the end of 2021 or the beginning of 2022.

“There is assistance intended for 40,000 families residing in villages 700 meters above sea level, worth \$165 per family,” he added. “We will also cooperate with the UN Food Program, which will allocate \$600 million to the Lebanese, starting at the beginning of next year.”

Mikati also referenced the smuggling and illegal storage of subsidized medicines for chronic and cancerous diseases and noted that an investigation into the lack of subsidized baby formula in the market showed that it was “used for nutritional purposes in dairy factories.”

Mikati stressed that the government had no intention of selling any of the state’s assets at the moment. “It’s not the right time,” he said. “Our current priority is to reform all sectors and improve the electricity supply.”

Ali Darwish, an MP in Mikati’s parliamentary bloc, said Mikati had “intensified his political consultations in search of a way out of the political crisis.”

Darwish told Arab News: “Everyone was convinced of the need to hold cabinet sessions. Everyone agreed on the need to defuse crises, and that judicial issues should only be resolved within the judiciary itself. When paralysis affects the public sector and the health sector, no party, including Hezbollah, has any interest in obstructing solutions, because everyone will be affected.”



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[Iraq Shiite leader Sadr cautions vote 'losers'](#)

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Thu, 2021-11-18 19:15

NAJAF, IRAQ: Influential Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, the big winner in initial results from Iraq's election last month, on Thursday called on the "losers" not to disturb the war-scarred country's democratic process. His appeal came after weeks of tensions that peaked in early November when an explosives-laden drone hit the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi, in what his office called an assassination attempt. Final results of the October 10 legislative ballot have still not been

announced. But the Conquest (Fatah) Alliance, the political arm of the pro-Iran Hashed Al-Shaabi, suffered a decline in seats from 48 to around 15, leading it to denounce the outcome as "fraud."

The Hashed is a paramilitary network now integrated into the regular forces. Sadr, who campaigned as a nationalist and critic of Iran, was the big winner with more than 70 of the 329 seats, according to the initial count.

At a press conference, he addressed "political forces who consider themselves the losers of these elections" and said their defeat "should not open a path to the ruin of Iraq's democratic process."

What they are doing, he added, "will only accentuate the people's rejection of you."

No group claimed responsibility for the drone attack in which Kadhem was unhurt.

It occurred two days after security forces clashed with supporters of Iran-backed parties near the high-security Green Zone, where Kadhem lives.

Despite their electoral losses, the Hashed will remain a political force as the country's myriad of factions engage in marathon negotiations to form alliances and name a new prime minister.

Sadr, however, reiterated the necessity of forming a majority government, saying: "Our options, as an individual or entity, are either as a majority government or opposition."

Since the election Sadr, who once led a militia against American and Iraqi government forces, has repeatedly said that the future prime minister should be from his party.

Experts say he could try to build a parliamentary majority by allying with groups outside of the Shiite community.

The new government, elected in a ballot with record-low turnout, will take power in a country mired in corruption and economic crisis.



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Water scarcity cost Iraq two million tons of wheat in 2021: Minister Iraqi migrants caught in border tensions in Belarus fly home

[UN security council calls on Houthis to end US embassy raid, release hostages](#)

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Fri, 2021-11-19 01:34

NEW YORK: The UN Security Council condemned “in the strongest terms” the Houthis’ ongoing breach of the former US embassy compound in Sanaa, calling

on the Iran-backed militia to immediately withdraw their militants from the premises and release the detainees.

The US had issued similar calls to the Houthis last week after the rebels stormed the compound that formerly hosted the US embassy in the Yemen capital and took hostage an unspecified number of Yemenis working at the premises.

The embassy raid came on the heels of a visit by a mission representing the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, the UK, France, Russia, and China). During the visit, they voiced support to the Yemeni government and criticized the Houthis, condemning their attacks on Saudi Arabia and the ongoing Marib offensive.

The US State Department has vowed to intensify its “diplomatic efforts to secure the release of our staff and the vacating of our compound, including through our international partners.”

The US transferred its embassy to Riyadh in 2015 at the onset of the civil war in Yemen.

Security council members specifically called for the protection of a diplomatic mission that has been temporarily recalled, “together with its property and archives.”

In a statement, the council “recalled the fundamental principles enshrined in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations notably the prohibition against the intrusion into the diplomatic property as well as the inviolability of the premises of the mission and their immunity from search, requisition, attachment or execution.”



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US calls on Houthis to 'immediately release' Sanaa embassy staff