

Uncle of Syria's Assad returns home from decades-long exile

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AFP

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BEIRUT: The uncle of Syrian President Bashar Assad has returned home from 36 years of exile to dodge arrest in France, the pro-government Al-Watan newspaper reported Friday.

Rifaat Assad, 84, arrived in Damascus on Thursday, Al-Watan said on its Facebook page, nearly a month after a Paris appeals court upheld a four-year prison sentence issued against him last year for misappropriating public funds in Syria, laundering the spoils and building a vast property portfolio in France with ill-gotten gains.

Formerly Syria's vice president, Rifaat Assad left his home country in 1984 after mounting a failed coup against his brother Hafez, who led Syria from 1971 to 2000.

"In order to prevent his imprisonment in France .. President Assad rises above what Rifaat Assad has said and done and allows him to return to Syria," Al-Watan said.

Rifaat is not expected to take up any political role, Al-Watan added.

Dubbed the "Butcher of Hama" for his alleged role in putting down an uprising in central Syria in 1982, Assad has been under investigation in France since 2014.

He was tried for crimes allegedly committed between 1984 and 2016, including aggravated tax fraud and misappropriation of Syrian funds.

A Paris court last June dismissed charges against Assad for the period 1984 to 1996, but found him guilty of organized laundering of funds embezzled from the Syrian public purse between 1996 and 2016. He was also convicted of tax fraud.

Last month, the Paris appeals court upheld the verdict against him.

He may not have to serve in prison given his advanced age, but the confiscation of his French real estate assets, worth an estimated 90 million euros (\$106 million), ordered at his initial trial, will now go ahead.

His French fortune includes two townhouses in chic Parisian neighborhoods, a stud farm, about 40 apartments, and a chateau.

Assad and his family also built up a huge portfolio of properties in Spain, valued at around 695 million euros, which were all seized by the authorities in 2017.



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[Lebanese protest as Iranian fuel supplies falter](#)

Fri, 2021-10-08 23:09

BEIRUT: Angry residents of Hermel in Lebanon's north of Bekaa valley region took to the streets on Friday near the Assi River bridge where they burned tires and blocked the road to protest the unavailability of fuel and the total power outage.

The Lebanese army intervened to reopen the roads following the first protests since Hezbollah delivered tons of Iranian fuel to Lebanon via illegal crossings with Syria, under the pretext of meeting people's needs.

The region is one of Hezbollah's strongholds. Discontent prevails in the Bekaa areas, especially in the Baalbek-Hermel region, where empty diesel tanks cannot operate the heaters needed to fight the extreme cold.

On Friday, the price of 20 liters of diesel jumped to LBP243,000 (\$161), equivalent to half the minimum wage, after subsidies were fully lifted. The exchange rate exceeded LBP19,000 to the dollar on the black market.

Mayor of Baalbak Haidar Shamas told Arab News that the protests are due to the non-delivery of Iranian diesel to the people who paid for it, adding that the Al-Amana company has not delivered it.

People wishing to buy Iranian diesel must pay in cash to Hezbollah's Al-Qard Al-Hasan Association, in accordance with the price determined by the US-sanctioned Al-Amana Co.

Al-Qard Al-Hasan is registered as a non-profit organization and was sanctioned by the US Treasury in 2016. However, its activity has not stopped.

Shamas said that in order to end people's resentment, Hezbollah asked neighborhoods to register their names in exchange for 500 liters of diesel for free, with the rest to be sold to them in accordance with the Al-Amana Co.'s pricing.

"However, if it decides to start distributing diesel to houses, the free distribution to public hospitals, bakeries and electric generators will stop, as the Iranian diesel quantity is not enough. The monthly fees of generators will rise again and exceed 1 million Lebanese pounds at least. People supporting Hezbollah have started protesting against its policy to provide diesel for areas that do not support the party. It has increased the confusion for Hezbollah which has no previous experience in this field," Shamas said.

There is a total power outage in the Baalbek-Hermel region, with lucky areas receiving just one hour of electricity per day.

Private generator owners have reduced their provision to only eight hours of electricity per day to drop fees to LBP600,000 after struggling families complained, with many opting to return to candles.

Elsewhere, protests sparked in Saida in Southern Lebanon as taxi drivers rejected the municipality's attempt to implement a project of developing transit lines between the city and its surroundings, especially for school and university students, after the daily transportation fees became unaffordable.

Taxi drivers protested in front of the municipality, blocking the road with their cars.

Separately, after visiting Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi on Friday, Prime Minister Najib Mikati said: "I am aware that there are great concerns, but we strive and seek to resolve them all."

During his meeting with Mikati on Thursday, International Aid Coordinator for Lebanon Ambassador Pierre Dukan stressed “the need to accelerate the implementation of reforms, expedite the launch of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and reach an agreement before the end of the year, when France seeks to organize an international conference to provide direct aid to the state budget.”

While meeting a number of Lebanese officials, US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea said: “The financial situation is very difficult, and there is no solution without reasoning with the IMF as soon as possible.”

Washington has suggested that it will help Lebanon get electricity from Jordan and facilitate the flow of Egyptian gas through Jordan and Syria to northern Lebanon.



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Hezbollah brings Iranian fuel into Lebanon, Al-Manar TV says Iranian fuel tankers bound for Lebanon yet to reach cash-strapped country, Tankertrackers says

Social media platforms doing little to combat online hate speech in the Arab world: Experts

Fri, 2021-10-08 23:05

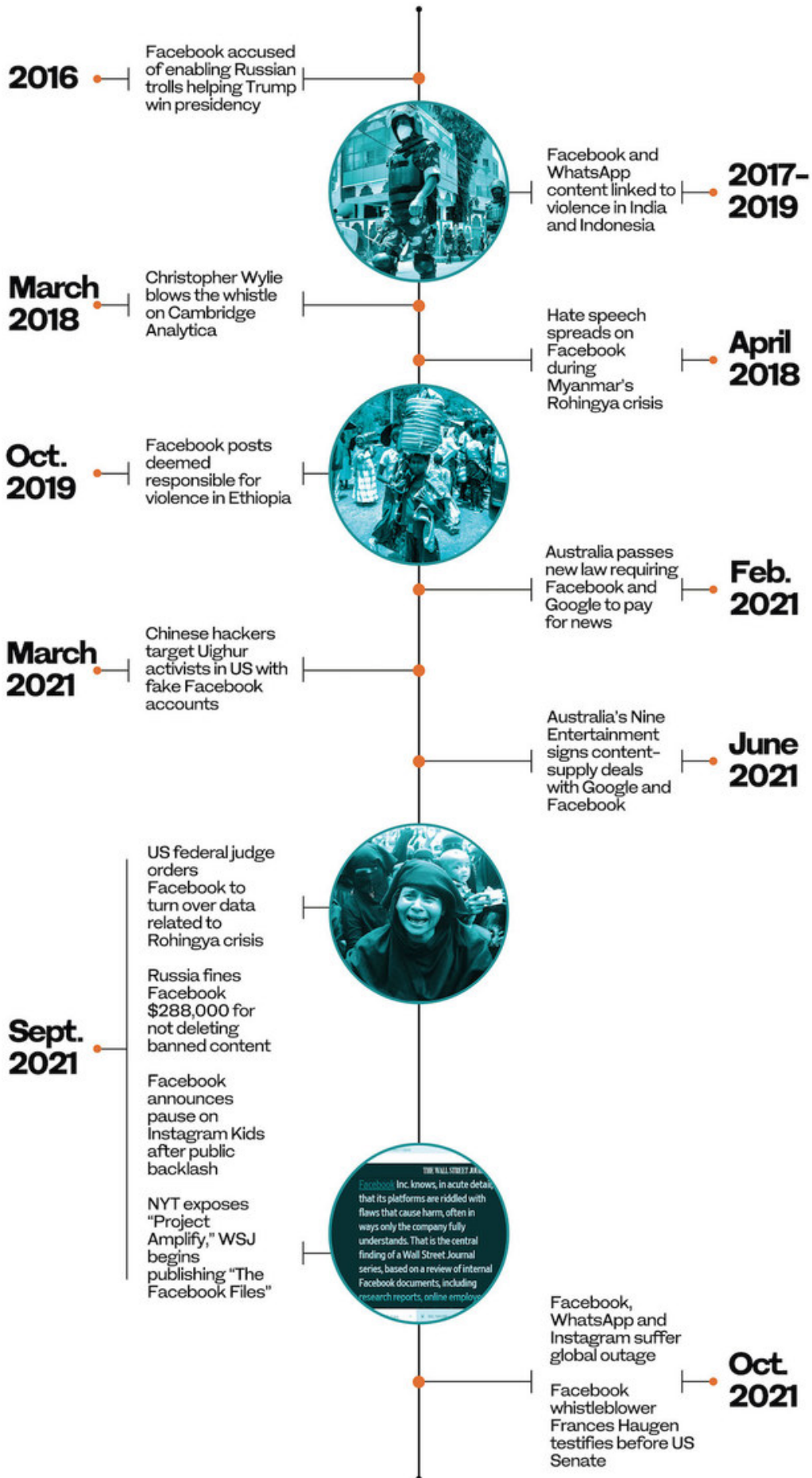
LONDON: For a platform with at least 2.91 billion “friends,” Facebook has been creating a lot of enemies of late, even among its own ranks.

Just this week, former Facebook employee and whistleblower Frances Haugen testified before members of the US Senate, delivering a scathing overview of how the world’s largest social networking site prioritizes profits over public safety.

This is in spite of its own extensive internal research, leaked to US media, which demonstrates the harm that Facebook and its products are causing worldwide to communities, democratic institutions and to children with fragile body image.

Yet, precious little has been done in the Arab world, for instance, to hold Facebook and other social networking platforms to account for the extremist ideas, bigoted views and hate speech that continue to find their way to millions of users across the region despite their supposed policing of content.

FACEBOOK: A TIMELINE OF SCANDAL



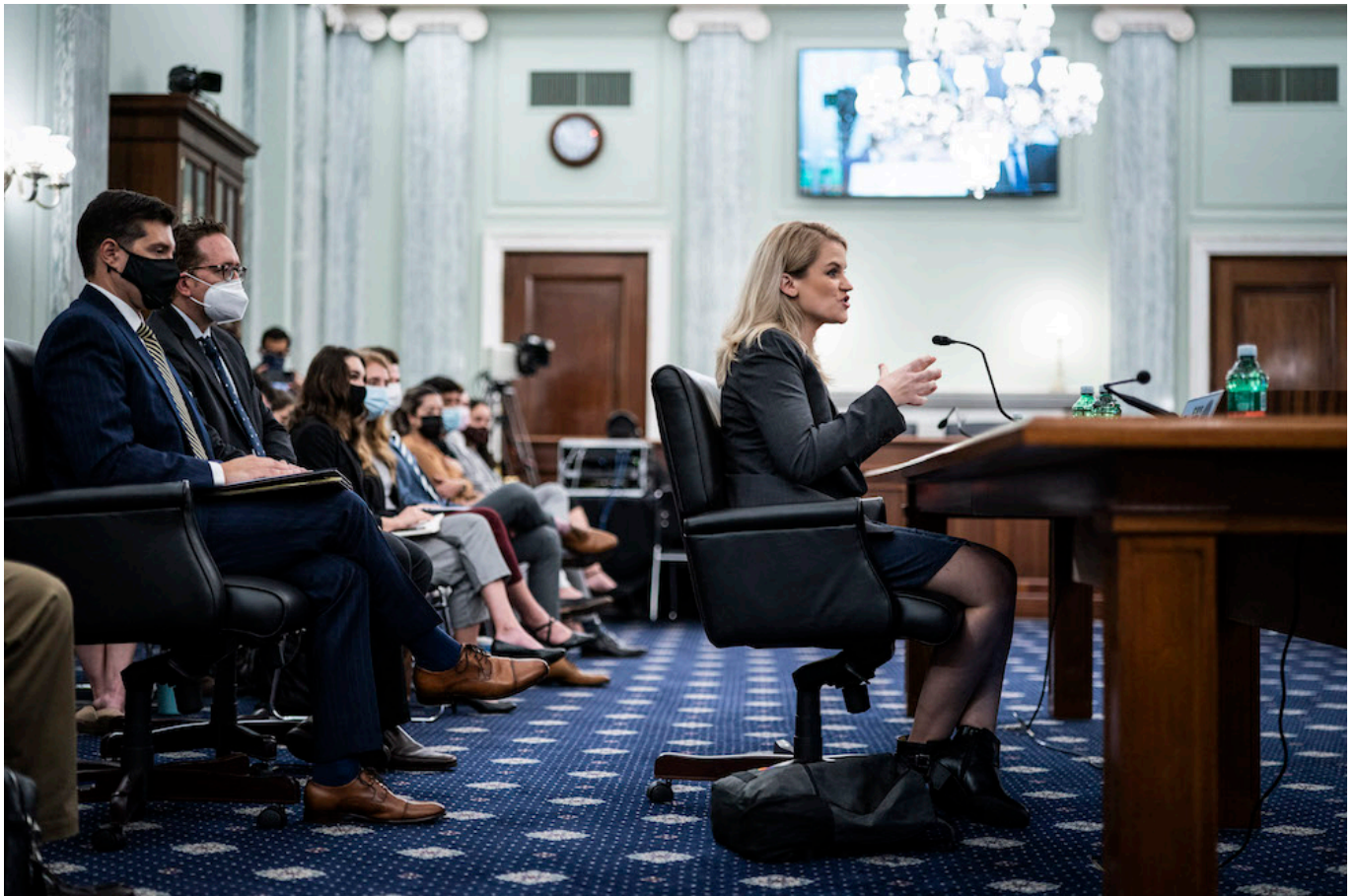
“With even just a quick search in Arabic, I found 38 groups or pages currently on Facebook with over 100 followers or likes that feature unmistakable references in their titles to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the most infamous example of anti-Jewish disinformation and hate speech in history,” David Weinberg, Washington director for international affairs at the Anti-Defamation League, told Arab News.

“One would think that if Facebook were even casually interested in proactively searching for horrific hate speech that blatantly violates its terms of service and could lead to deadly violence, that these sorts of pages would have been an easy place for them to start.”

Indeed, although Facebook removed millions of posts featuring hate speech from its platforms in 2020, it still has a lot of ground to cover, especially in languages other than English.

“Facebook has not fixed the real problem. Instead, it has created PR stunts. What Haugen said exposed all their wrongdoing,” Mohamad Najem, the Beirut-based executive director of SMEX, a digital rights organization focusing on freedom of expression, online privacy and safety, told Arab News.

“Unfortunately, all these threats are increasing and tech companies are doing the minimum about it.”



Former Facebook employee and whistleblower Frances Haugen testifies during a Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation hearing entitled ‘Protecting Kids Online: Testimony from a Facebook Whistleblower’ on Capitol Hill, October 05, 2021 in Washington, DC. (AFP)

Responding to the allegation on Friday, a Facebook spokesperson told Arab News: “We do not tolerate hate speech on our platforms. Which is why we continue to invest heavily in people, systems and technology to find and remove this content as quickly as possible.

“We now have 40,000 people working on safety and security at Facebook and have invested \$13 billion into it since 2016. Our technology proactively identifies hate speech in over 40 languages globally, including Arabic.

“Whilst we recognize there is more work to do, we are continuing to make significant improvements to tackle the spread of harmful content.

“As our most recent Community Standards Enforcement Report showed, we’re finding and removing more hate speech on our platforms than ever before: the prevalence of hate speech – the amount of that content people actually see – on Facebook is now 0.05 percent of content viewed and is down by almost 50 percent in the last three quarters.”

Although Facebook has come under particular scrutiny of late, it is not the sole offender. The perceived laxity of moderation on microblogging site Twitter has also caused alarm.

Despite recently updating its policy on hate speech, which states that users must “not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin,” accounts doing just that are still active on the platform.



Major social media services including Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp were hit by a massive outage on October 4, 2021, tracking sites showed, impacting potentially tens of millions of users. (AFP)

“For example, Iran’s supreme leader is permitted to exploit Twitter using a broad array of accounts, including separate dedicated Twitter accounts, for his propaganda, not just in Persian, Arabic and English but also in Urdu, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian and Hindi,” Weinberg said.

“Twitter also permits the accounts of major media organs of Iranian-backed violent extremist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Even Facebook hasn’t generally been that lax.”

Indeed, accounts in the Arab world, such as those of exiled Egyptian cleric Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and designated terrorist Qais Al-Khazali – both of whom have been featured in Arab News’ “Preachers of Hate” series – remain active and prominent, with the former accumulating 3.2 million followers.

In one of his hate-filled posts, Al-Qaradawi wrote: “Throughout history, God has imposed upon them (the Jews) people who would punish them for their corruption. The last punishment was that of Hitler. This was a divine punishment for them. Next time, God willing, it will be done at the hands of the faithful believers.”

The failure to consistently detect hate speech in languages other than English appears to be a common problem across social networking sites.

As Haugen pointed out in her Senate evidence, Facebook has “documentation that shows how much operational investment there was by different languages, and it showed a consistent pattern of underinvestment in languages that are not English.”



Haugen left Facebook in May and provided internal company documents about Facebook to journalists and others, alleging that Facebook consistently chooses profit over safety. (Getty via AFP)

As a result, extremist groups have been at liberty to exploit this lax approach to content moderation in other languages.

The consensus among experts is that, in the pursuit of profits, social media platforms may have increased social division, inspired hate attacks and created a global trust deficit that has led to an unprecedented blurring of the line between fact and fiction.

“I saw Facebook repeatedly encounter conflicts between its own profits and our safety,” Haugen told senators during her testimony on Tuesday.

“Facebook consistently resolved these conflicts in favor of its own profits. The result has been more division, more harm, more lies, more threats and more combat. In some cases, this dangerous online talk has led to actual violence that harms and even kills people.

“As long as Facebook is operating in the shadows, hiding its research from public scrutiny, it is unaccountable. Until the incentives change, Facebook will not change. Left alone, Facebook will continue to make choices that go against the common good. Our common good.”

The influence of social media companies on public attitudes and trust cannot be overstated. For instance, in 2020, a massive 79 percent of Arab youth obtained their news from social media, compared with just 25 percent in 2015, according to the Arab Youth Survey.



Supporters of US President Donald Trump, including Jake Angeli, a QAnon supporter known for his painted face and horned hat, protest in the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

Facebook and other popular Facebook-owned products, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, which experienced an almost six-hour global outage on Monday, have been repeatedly linked to outbreaks of violence, from the incitement of racial hatred in Myanmar against Rohingya Muslims to the storming of the Capitol in Washington by supporters of outgoing President Donald Trump in January this year.

The company's own research shows it is "easier to inspire people to anger than to other emotions," Haugen said in a recent CBS News interview for "60 Minutes."

She added: "Facebook has realized that if they change the algorithm to be safer, people will spend less time on the site, they'll click on fewer ads, they'll make less money."

Many have applauded Haugen's courage for coming forward and leaking thousands of internal documents that expose the firm's inner workings – claims that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has said are "just not true."

In recent months, the social networking site has been fighting legal battles on multiple fronts. In Australia, the government has taken Facebook to court to settle its status as a publisher, which would make it liable for defamation in relation to content posted by third parties.

Russia, meanwhile, is trying to impose a stringent fine on the social media giant worth 5-10 percent of its annual turnover in response to a slew of alleged legal violations.



Although Facebook removed millions of posts featuring hate speech from its platforms in 2020, it still has a lot of ground to cover. (AFP/File Photo)

Earlier this year, the G7 group of nations, consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US, signed a tax agreement stipulating that Facebook and other tech giants, including Amazon, must adhere to a global minimum corporate tax of at least 15 percent.

In Facebook's defense, it must be said that its moderators face a grueling task, navigating the rules and regulations of various governments, combined with the growing sophistication of online extremists.

According to Jacob Berntsson, head of policy and research for Tech Against Terrorism, an initiative launched to fight online extremism while also protecting freedom of speech, terrorist organization have become more adept at using social networking platforms without falling foul of moderators.

"I think to be very clear, Facebook can certainly improve their response in this area, but it is very difficult when, for example, the legal status of the group isn't particularly clear," Berntsson told Arab News.

"I think it all goes to show that this is massively difficult, and content moderation on this scale is virtually impossible. So, there are always going to be mistakes. There are always going to be gaps."

Twitter: [@Tarek_AliAhmad](https://twitter.com/Tarek_AliAhmad)



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Muslim civil rights group sues Facebook over hate speech
French court orders Twitter to reveal anti-hate speech efforts
Organization of Islamic Cooperation urges steps against hate speech online
Facebook accused of promoting hate speech in India

[A Mosul book cafe raises political awareness in the run-up to Iraq elections](#)

Author:

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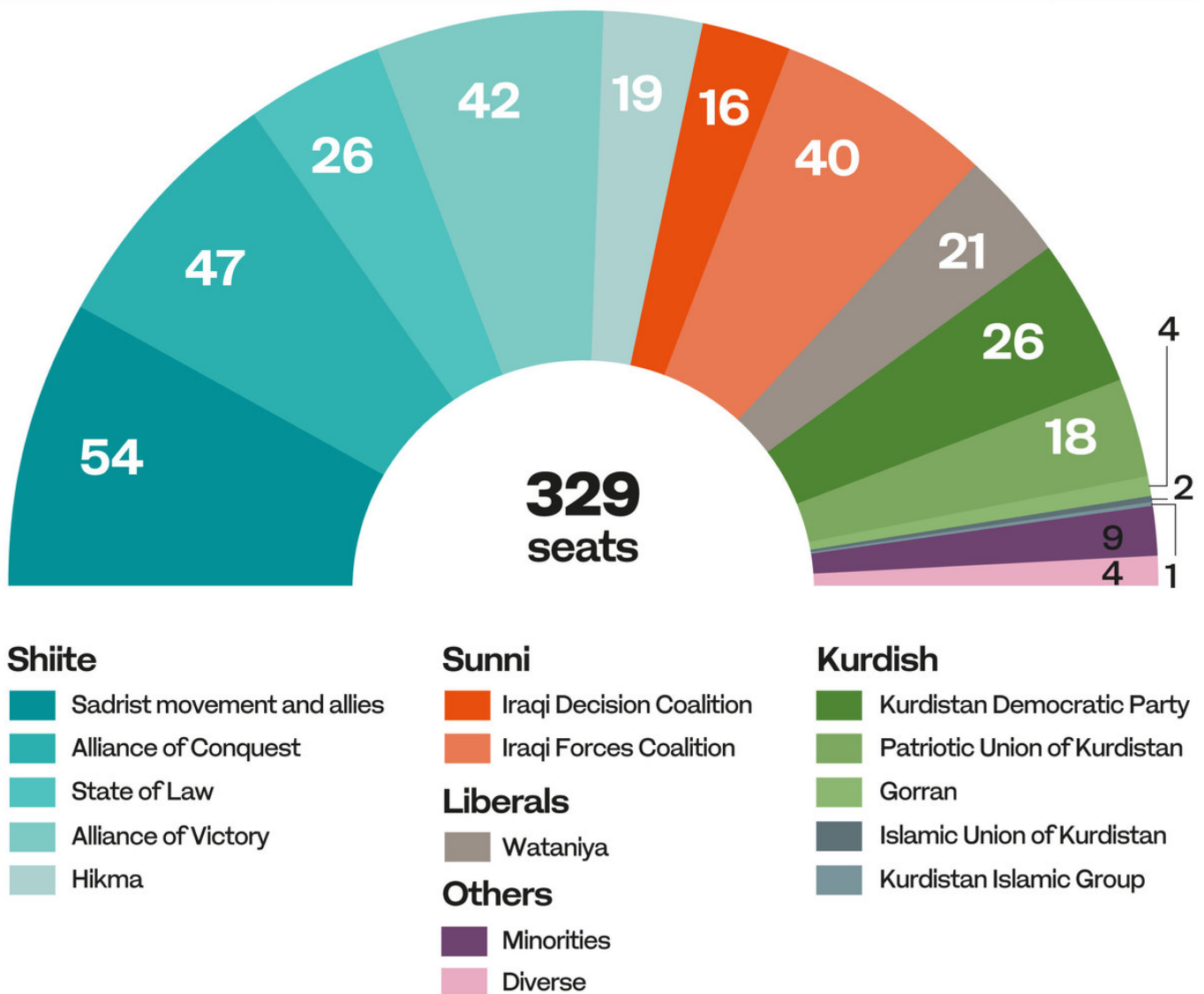
MOSUL, Iraq/BOGOTA, Colombia: Taking a seat at the top table at Mosul’s Book Forum cafe one evening in September, political blogger Saad Amer introduced his two guest speakers, both independent candidates running in Iraq’s Oct. 10 parliamentary elections.

This was the fifth such event organized by the Khutwa Club, a debating society that meets regularly at the northern city’s popular cafe – its foremost cultural and literary venue.

Since Mosul was retaken from Daesh extremists in 2017, the cafe has become a popular and widely celebrated hub for young activists, academics, journalists and students to share ideas.

In a country where politics is dominated by armed groups and where critics are often murdered with impunity, the Khutwa Club’s success in motivating a mostly apathetic youth is a remarkable feat in itself.

OUTGOING IRAQI PARLIAMENT



“There is a huge gap between citizens and the political system in Iraq,” Harith Yaseen Abdulqader, the Book Forum’s co-founder, told Arab News during a Khutwa Club event.

“Our goal is to help people look in-depth at the Iraqi political system and how to spread awareness among the people so that they can choose the best candidate for them, to understand the electoral program of the candidates, and understand the gaps in their programs.”

Political education is at the core of the Khutwa Club’s mission. In 2003, after decades of Baathist rule, the US and other Western powers installed a democratic system in Baghdad modelled on their own time-honored institutions.

The tenets of Western-style democracy were alien to many Iraqis, who for centuries had conducted their affairs along tribal and religious lines. Foreign powers, armed groups and corrupt individuals soon took advantage of the situation, fashioning a system that was democratic in name only.

“The goal of this club is to educate citizens about common political terms, aspects and ideas,” Abdulqader said. “Perhaps a citizen doesn’t know what liberalism is, what civic politics is, or what political Islam is, or the difference between the ruling parties and the Islamist parties.”



Election hopefuls are using Mosul’s Book Forum cafe to reverse the trend of political apathy among the Iraqi youth. (AFP)

There is certainly a thirst for such ideas among Iraq’s swelling ranks of jobless educated youth. Fed up with the country’s ruling elite, young Iraqis marched in their hundreds of thousands in cities across the country in

October 2019, demanding the overthrow of the post-2003 order.

Although the protests secured the resignation of then-prime minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, the movement soon fizzled out with the onset of the global pandemic and under savage attack by pro-government militias.

Crucially, without a defined political leadership heading the movement, Iraq's young protesters were unable to translate their energy and idealism into an electoral force capable of making their demands a reality.

By offering discussions on political literacy and participation, the Khutwa Club and others like it might be the very platforms to make that transition possible.

"Maybe what we do here will open horizons for people who want to run for election in the future," said Abdulqader.

"We encourage young people to engage in politics. We are trying to create new young political faces with a large support base and with an understanding of the Iraqi political process. Maybe we can be the supporters for these young people if they decided to run for election.

"For more than 17 years we have seen the same political faces. They did not offer anything new. They still made the same fake promises. We need to focus on new faces, especially the young ones. There is a difference between the mentality of a 70-year-old politician and a 35-year-old."

Seated in the audience is Obadiyah Muhammad, a 22-year-old law student and one of the club's regular attendees. He is grateful for the opportunity to hear from local candidates running on an independent ticket.

"Mosul suffers from the dominance of big political parties," Muhammad told Arab News. "I wanted to come today to support independent candidates, to hear what they have to say, to see if I agree with them or not."

The Khutwa Club is unique in providing a platform for candidates who would otherwise be drowned out by the dominant parties.

"The club offers an environment to exchange opinions and challenges its guests," Muhammad said. "We did not have such a place before in Mosul and I see it as something extraordinary."

Mosul, situated in Iraq's Sunni-majority northwest, was not always so tolerant of political expression. Between 2014 and 2017, when the city was the capital of Daesh's self-styled caliphate, free speech and democratic participation were brutally suppressed.



Daesh militants brutally suppressed free speech and democratic participation during their three-year rule in parts of Iraq and Syria, with Mosul as their capital. (File photo)

Even before the militants seized control, the city was anything but a bastion of free speech. Saad Amer, the political blogger chairing that evening's Khutwa Club debate, remembers only too well how dangerous speaking out could be.

"Political thought was forbidden before 2014. Mosul had been controlled by Al-Qaeda since 2009. According to my memory, no one could speak of politics, or discuss secular or liberal ideas. Everyone was afraid," the 28-year-old told Arab News on the meeting's fringes.

"Everyone, including me, was just trying to keep up with life here, and when election day came, we would go to vote for a party from our ethnicity to protect us and our rights.

"After 2017, there was a sort of revolution that happened in Mosul. Young people started to feel more of a sense of freedom and more space for free speech, to speak our minds and discuss our thoughts in public."

Even now, though, the Khutwa Club and its guests face occasional intimidation from forces that thrive in Iraq's murky political environment.

"We do sometimes receive threats from certain political parties and some armed groups, but we always find a way to get around this and solve it," Amer said. "Some of these threats include harsh language, not only for the club but also for the political opinions we have and our criticism of political parties."

The independent candidates on the podium make a convincing case for a

cleaner, fairer and more transparent system in Iraq, doing away with corruption, armed groups and foreign interference. But without a powerful party machinery to back them up, few stand a chance of entering parliament or effecting meaningful change once there.

Asil Al-Agha, 41, is one of the few female candidates standing for election in Mosul. A former member of Nineveh's provincial council, running on an Iraq Renaissance and Peace Bloc ticket, Al-Agha has proven her mettle as a skilled campaigner, but is all too aware that she must operate within the confines of an imperfect system.

"A big proportion of people here are suffering from poverty and lack of jobs," she told Arab News at her office near Mosul's university campus. "Politicians will take advantage of this, promising jobs and money to buy votes."

Al-Agha added: "One of the things that people suffer with here is bureaucratic red tape and corruption in state departments, where citizens are exploited and forced to pay bribes. To say nothing about health. We do not have government hospitals that provide the necessary treatment and good care.

"Even if I made it to Baghdad, it would be very difficult to work on these issues. I have to be strong and have a powerful political alliance where they can pressure others so we can get our rights. A lonely politician can't get anything done alone. This is why I am running with a party, not independently."

Iraq's 2018 election, the first since the defeat of Daesh, saw the country's lowest-ever turnout. Given the precarious health of Iraqi democracy, change from within may be the best and only hope for educated young Iraqis disillusioned by the failures of the October 2019 revolution.

"We believe that the only way to achieve change is to enter political work and participate in the elections to choose good people to run the government," said Amer, closing the Khutwa Club event.

"This is the only available option."

• **Twitter:** *@meethak55 and @RobertPEdwards*





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[Abu Dhabi crown prince visits Saudi pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai](#)

Author:

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DUBAI: Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces, visited Saudi Arabia's pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai on Thursday.

Prince Turki bin Mohammed bin Fahd bin Abdulaziz, the Saudi minister of state and member of the Saudi Cabinet, received him.

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed accompanied Prince Turki on a tour of the pavilion, which rises six stories above the ground and features a 1,320 square-meter inclined mirrored screen. The Kingdom's pavilion was designed to showcase Saudi Arabia's ancient culture, heritage, the wonders of its natural

landscape as well as the rapid drive and innovation of its present and future ambitions.

Prince Turki also held a meeting with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed inside the pavilion and conveyed the greetings of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and their wishes to the UAE people for steady progress and prosperity.

Prince Turki bin Mohammed bin Fahd congratulated Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed on launching Expo 2020 Dubai, which has been billed as the world's greatest show and opened its gates on Oct. 1 with more than 200 countries and companies from around the globe.

During the meeting, the two leaders discussed the distinguished bilateral relations the countries share and ways to improve them.

Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE deputy prime minister and minister of finance; Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, deputy prime minister of the UAE and minister of presidential affairs, and Saudi Ambassador to the UAE Turki Al-Dakhil attended the meeting.









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Saudi singers Aseel Abu Baker, Dalia Mubarak to perform at Expo 2020's Jalsat concert series Al-Wasl Plaza at Expo 2020 Dubai to wow guests with 3 'immersive' shows