

Populist Iraq cleric demands action over deadly Covid unit fire

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Wed, 2021-07-14 10:53

BAGHDAD: Populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr has warned he will hold the Iraqi government responsible if it fails to take action over a devastating fire that killed at least 60 people in a Covid isolation unit.

The warning comes just months before Iraq is scheduled to go to the polls in October for an early parliamentary election that was demanded by a protest movement backed by Sadr's supporters.

"It is incumbent on the government to work immediately to firmly and seriously punish those to blame for hospital fires, whether in Nasiriyah or other provinces, no matter their (political) affiliation," Sadr tweeted late Tuesday.

"Otherwise, this government will be held responsible from its lowest to its highest (official)."

The devastating blaze, which swept through the Covid isolation unit of Al-Hussein Hospital in the southern city of Nasiriyah on Monday evening, was the second such fire in Iraq in three months.

An April fire at a Baghdad Covid hospital killed 82 people and was also blamed on the explosion of badly stored oxygen bottles.

That blaze triggered widespread anger and resulted in the suspension and subsequent resignation of then health minister Hassan Al-Tamimi, a nominee of Sadr's powerful political bloc.

Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi has ordered an investigation into Monday's blaze "that will lead to those directly responsible," his office said.

He already dismissed the hospital's manager, the provincial health director and the local civil defense chief.

Arrest warrants have been issued for 13 officials, including the provincial health director.

Sadr demanded that the findings of the official inquiry be released quickly.

"It must not end up like others conducted into previous hospital fires. Or else we have other means of protecting people's safety and dignity."

The health ministry said Wednesday that 60 people had been confirmed to have died in the fire. Forensics experts had identified 39 bodies while 21 were still unidentified.

Demonstrations in honor of the victims were planned in Nasiriyah later after residents held a candle-lit vigil late on Tuesday.



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Fire kills at least 83 at COVID-19 hospital in southern Iraq
Iraqi protesters face off against cleric Moqtada Sadr's followers

[Istanbul launches bid to host 2036 Summer Olympics](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-07-14 18:29

ISTANBUL: Istanbul has launched its bid to host the 2036 Summer Olympics and Paralympics.

If approved, Turkey will become the first Muslim-majority nation to host the event.

“To ensure that Istanbul gets its deserved place on the world sports map, we

are focusing on this chief goal," the city's mayor and former amateur soccer player Ekrem Imamoglu said on Tuesday in a press briefing.

"We put forward our will, and on behalf of Istanbul and Turkish people, we want to host the Olympics and Paralympic Games in Istanbul."

The same day, Imamoglu launched Istanbul's new sports vision and future plan, and called on all relevant institutions in Turkey to join forces with the municipality. "Let's make this happen!" he tweeted.

The mayor is now focusing on improving the transportation and sports infrastructure of the city and has called on the private sector and big sports clubs, such as Fenerbahce, Galatasaray, and Besiktas, to cooperate with him.

Istanbul will compete against several European, Middle Eastern and South American cities, including London and India's Ahmedabad, which are also seeking to host the games.

This year's Tokyo 2020 Olympics, to be held from July 23 to Aug. 8, will host more than 100 Turkish athletes who will compete across 18 branches.

Fifty women athletes will represent the country, the highest level of female representation from Turkey since London 2012.

Istanbul, a city of 16.5 million, boasts eight stadiums, 52 sports facilities having 25 pools, 42 fitness saloons, 44 tennis courts, 41 football courts, one athletics track and two ice rinks. These facilities provide children with training in 15 different sporting branches.

The Ipsos Global Advisor survey, conducted between May 21 and June 4, with more than 19,000 adults across 28 countries, revealed that Turkish respondents expressed the most support for the Olympics, with 71 percent saying they thought holding the Tokyo Games despite the pandemic is the right move.

"Countries that are willing to host the Olympics are also required to increase their capacity in the Paralympics. Therefore, hosting these events requires accessible infrastructure in a host city," Mert Yasar, a lawyer specialized in sports law, told Arab News.

Turkey, home to about 5 million disabled citizens, would need to improve accessibility for the disabled, such as increasing the number of smoothly functioning elevators and escalators at the metro stations, installing ramps that conform to global standards, ensuring wheelchair access in all venues, and expanding routing signs.

"Now, the disabled residents of the city face problems in using public transportation as they are still not completely disabled-friendly. The foremost advantage of hosting the Olympics will be to provide Istanbul with modern and sustainable infrastructure for people with disabilities while cultivating nationwide respect and understanding for them," Yasar said.

Ensuring an accessible environment and standards is part of the Host City Contract that is awarded by the International Olympic Committee.

Yasar warned that the Olympics can be extremely expensive to host, with costs increasing to \$45 billion for Beijing in 2008.

This financial burden can weaken enthusiasm for hosting the games. However, according to Yasar, cities are eager to host the Olympics because it becomes a soft power opportunity for them to attract attention and reveal their cultural appeal.

“However, if Istanbul is serious with this bid, it should engage in social activities to boost a popular culture for the Olympics. Although people support hosting the games, they should also be encouraged to buy tickets and attend them. If not, the Olympics can also bring a serious economic burden to the urban economy as it turned out to be the case in Japan during the pandemic,” he said.



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Erdogan slams move to switch Champions League final from Istanbul as 'political' UEFA Champions League final moved from Istanbul to Porto due to UK-Turkey travel restrictions

[UAE opens Israel embassy in Tel Aviv](#)

Wed, 2021-07-14 18:01

LONDON: The UAE's ambassador to Israel opened his country's embassy in Israel on Wednesday.

Mohamed Al-Khaja inaugurated the diplomatic offices in Tel Aviv less than a year after the UAE became only the third Arab country to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel.

"It is time for a new approach and thinking to determine a better path for the future of the region," Al-Khaja said. "We hope that the opening of the UAE embassy in Tel Aviv will represent a cornerstone in the growing relations between our two countries and peoples."



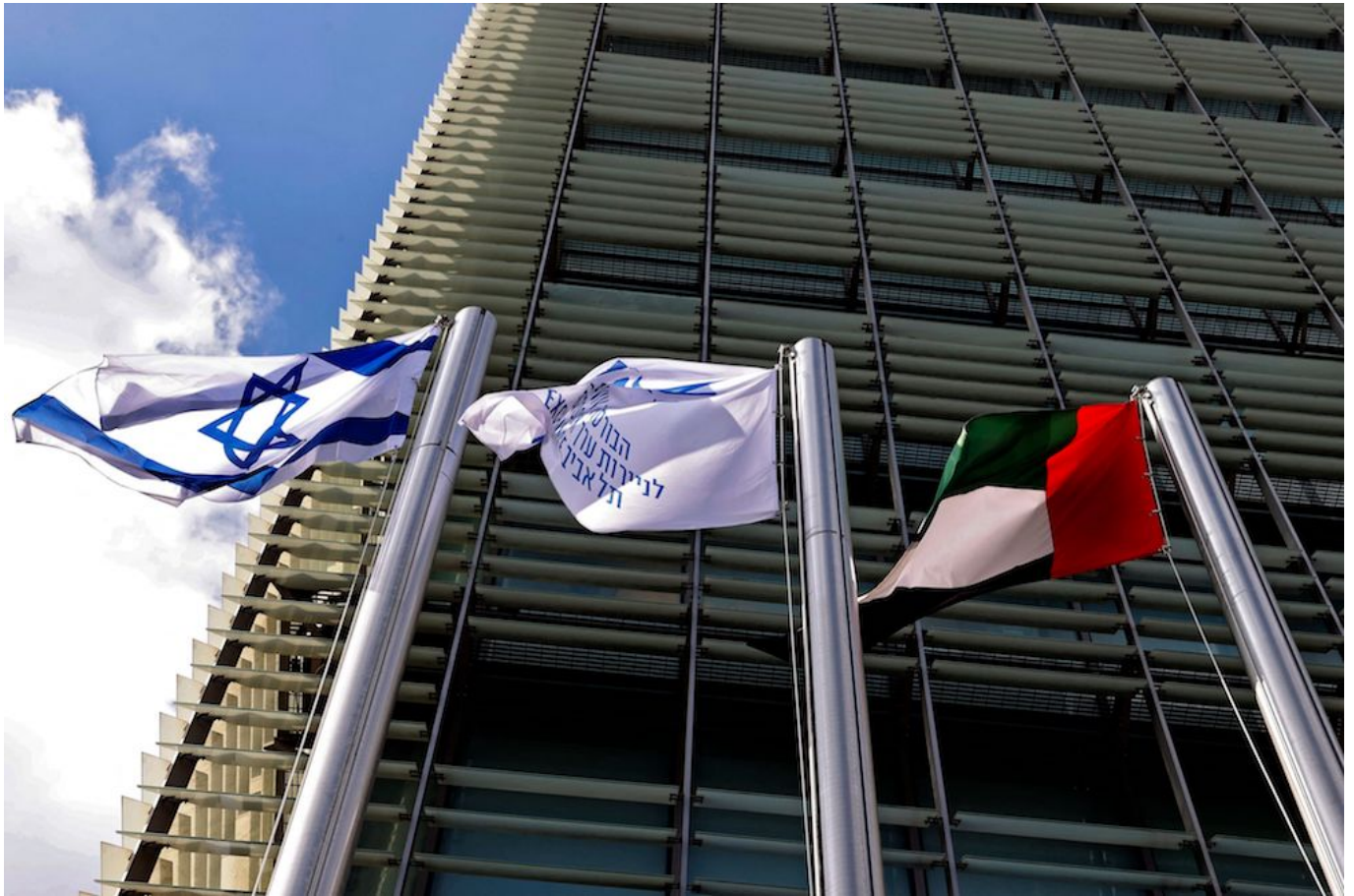
Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Emirati Ambassador to Israel Mohamed Al-Khaja cut the ribbon at the new UAE embassy in Tel Aviv. (AFP)

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, and UAE Minister of State for Food and Water Security Mariam Al-Mheiri attended the ceremony.

Herzog said: "The opening of the UAE embassy in Tel Aviv is an important milestone in our joint journey toward a future of peace, prosperity and

security for the Middle East.

“Seeing the UAE flag flying proudly in Tel Aviv was an unattainable dream just one year ago. In many ways, it is now a normal thing.”



The UAE embassy in Israel is housed in Tel Aviv’s new stock exchange building. (AFP)

The UAE reached a US-brokered agreement in August to normalize ties with Israel. In the following weeks, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco reached similar deals.

The UAE and Israel have signed a flurry of economic and cooperation deals in the months since.

Al-Mheiri praised the progress on relations.

“This is a new era of development and prosperity for our two countries,” she said. “The opening of the embassy represents a milestone and will facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences across various vital sectors.”



Israel's President Isaac Herzog cuts a ribbon with UAE Ambassador to Israel Mohamed Al Khaja. (AP)

The UAE Embassy is situated in the same tower as Israel's stock exchange in the heart of Tel Aviv's business district.

The Emirati embassy's inauguration came weeks after Israel Foreign Minister Yair Lapid cut the ribbon on its embassy in Abu Dhabi.





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UAE cabinet approves opening embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel opens embassy in Abu Dhabi
Lapid, on UAE trip, opens first Israeli embassy in Gulf

[Tunisian parliament speaker Ghannouchi contracts COVID-19, adviser says](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Tue, 2021-07-13 18:40

TUNIS: The speaker of Tunisia's parliament and the leader of the Islamist Ennahda Party, Rached Ghannouchi, has contracted COVID-19, an adviser to

Ghannouchi told Reuters on Tuesday.

Ghannouchi, 80, is at home and will work remotely, the adviser said.

Ghannouchi, the leader of the biggest party in the parliament, received two doses of an anti-COVID vaccine this year.

Tunisia is seeing a significant increase in COVID-19 cases, with intensive care wards almost full, health authorities said, after successfully containing the virus in the first wave last year.

In total, Tunisia has recorded more than 500,000 coronavirus cases and about 16,500 deaths.



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Ennahda's Ghannouchi to stand for national elections in Tunisia
Virus-hit Tunisia brings Covid care home

Grief and anger: Iraqis demand justice as hospital blaze kills 92

Tue, 2021-07-13 22:00

JEDDAH: Grieving and angry Iraqis demanded justice on Tuesday after at least 92 people died when an explosion and fire ripped through a coronavirus hospital in the southern city of Nasiriyah.

The fire in a temporary quarantine clinic at Al-Hussein Hospital began when sparks from faulty wiring spread to an oxygen tank, which exploded.

By early morning on Tuesday, only the charred remains of the building were visible, with colored blankets strewn across the blackened debris as wisps of smoke rose from the rubble. The dead included 21 charred bodies that were still unidentified.



Iraqis react in grief at a funeral procession in Najaf for those killed in a massive fire that engulfed a coronavirus isolation ward of Al-Hussein hospital in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah. (AFP)

It was the second such incident in three months, after 82 people were killed when oxygen tanks blew up at a COVID-19 hospital in Baghdad in April. President Barham Salih said both fires were “the result of endemic corruption and mismanagement that disregards the lives of Iraqis.”

Rescue teams at the Al-Hussein clinic used a heavy crane on Tuesday to remove the melted remains of the building, and relatives gathered near by as young volunteers cleared debris.

“This is an unforgivable crime,” said Abu Nour Al-Shawi. “A patient comes in looking for treatment and he ends up being carried out in a coffin by his family. This place is not even fit for animals.”



Mourners in Najaf prepare to bury victims of a fire that swept through a coronavirus ward in the southern city of Nasiriyah. (AP)

Uday Al-Jaberi, who lost four relatives in the fire, said: “I want to send a message to those who committed this crime – haven’t you had enough of Nasiriyah’s blood? We don’t have a government in power, we have a mafia. We have criminals ruling the country.”

Imad Hashim, 46, whose mother, sister-in-law and niece died in the fire, said: “What should I say after losing my family? No point demanding anything from a failed government. Three days and this case will be forgotten like others.”

At the city's morgue, anger spread among people waiting to receive their relatives' bodies.

"No quick response to the fire, not enough firefighters. Sick people burned to death. It's a disaster," said Mohammed Fadhil, whose brother died.

A doctor at the hospital said it had no basic safety precautions. "The hospital lacks a fire sprinkler system or even a simple fire alarm," he said. "We complained many times that a tragedy could happen any moment from a cigarette stub, but every time we got the same answer from health officials: 'We don't have enough money'."

Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi ordered the suspension and arrest of health and civil defense managers in Nasiriyah, and the hospital's manager. Government investigators arrived in the city on Tuesday morning and their findings would be published next week, he said.





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Saudi Arabia 'deeply saddened' after nearly 100 killed in Iraq COVID-19 hospital fire
Fire kills at least 83 at COVID-19 hospital in southern Iraq