

10 years on, Libyan revolutionaries live with wounds, unfulfilled dreams

Author:

Wed, 2021-02-17 02:53

MISRATA: As revolution swept their region in 2011, three young Libyans joined mass protests against Muammar Qaddafi's four-decade rule. They now live divided by Libya's frontlines, their futures irrevocably shaped by the uprising.

The first demonstrations against Qaddafi's rule began in the eastern city of Benghazi on Feb. 17, 2011. A decade on, Libya is still split between rival factions, and shell and shrapnel holes scar its cities.

The UN has backed a new effort to unite Libya's warring sides through an interim government and national elections at the end of the year. But many Libyans remain skeptical.

Usama Ali Al-Aguri, a graduate from Benghazi, was unemployed in 2011 and at the time decried what he called the "injustice that we suffered and heard of from our fathers and grandfathers."

As the fighting spread through the summer of 2011, he joined the assault on Tripoli. When he and a comrade went to reconnoiter an attack, Qaddafi's forces spotted them.

"There was massive shooting at us. I got a bullet in my leg," he said. His comrade was killed. He ended up in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down.

He condemns many of those who emerged as leaders in 2011. "The revolution has been stolen from the honorable people now in their graves," he said.

As the country fell further apart, he joined many others from the east in backing Khalifa Haftar, head of the eastern military forces whose push to capture Tripoli failed last year.

Al-Aguri said his injury changed his life. Now 34, he lives for his two children, he said, and for work he goes each morning to the cattle market to buy and sell livestock.

Hisham Al-Windi came from a family that did well under Qaddafi – his father was a diplomat. But after taking part in protests, he learned he was wanted by police and fled to Tunis.

Traveling to the south of Tunisia, he crossed through a border post held by the rebels and joined their battle in the western mountains. "I was several months in the fight," he said.

Al-Windi was among the first fighters to storm Qaddafi's Tripoli compound.

Wandering through the rooms where the leader had lived, he found an item known to all Libyans – his brocaded military hat.

Interviewed that day on television wearing the hat, Al-Windi voiced his hopes for the future, briefly gaining international recognition as a face of Libya's uprising.

"I wanted to say first that Libyans were not as bad as people thought. And I was also saying 'Qaddafi is finished and we need to rebuild'," he said.

He now works in Tunis and is hopeful for change.

"People say to me: 'You took part in this disaster. How do you like it now?' Well of course I don't. But it doesn't mean you have to choose between Qaddafi and chaos. Revolution is a process. We must build a new Libya that we deserve," he said.

In Misrata, Malek Salem Al-Mejae, then aged 20, began to fight in 2011 when his city came under attack by Qaddafi's forces.

That July, he, too, was wounded, losing a leg.

"I was in the back of the truck. A missile fell behind us," he said. "Some of my friends were killed. I received treatment in Tunisia, then returned to Libya."

He had hoped to see far greater progress in Libya than he has in the last decade, and blames Libya's post-revolutionary leaders for the country's failure to unite.

"Unfortunately the situation is as you see it after 10 years of wars. The politicians, who were entrusted with the task, were not up to the standard."



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[Why was Iraqi Kurdistan's Irbil subjected to another rocket attack?](#)

Wed, 2021-02-17 02:48

IRBIL, IRAQI KURDISTAN: With the evidence in hand, independent analysts are hesitant to pin the blame on any specific group for Monday's rocket strike on Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. But what they all agree on is that both the timing and nature of the attack, which principally targeted a base in the city's airport hosting US military personnel, strongly suggest that it was the handiwork of one or more Iran-backed militias.

According to reports, a volley of approximately 14 rockets hit Erbil international airport and nearby residential areas, killing a civilian contractor and injuring up to nine people. Clips of the incident quickly flooded social media and prompted an extended debate on Twitter among defense analysts over the correct course of US action in the situation.

David Pollock, Bernstein Fellow at the Washington Institute, pointed out that the Saraya Awliya Al-Dam, the self-proclaimed Shiite militia that has claimed responsibility for the attack, has threatened via Instagram more operations targeting what it calls the "American occupation" of Iraq.

"Iran has officially denounced the attack, but that's just the usual propaganda," Pollock told Arab News while emphasizing the fact that the culprits have yet to be identified. He added: "The Iranians may actually support (the attack) to pressure the US to leave Iraq, in line with all their other threats."

The autonomous Kurdistan Region has long been viewed as a distinctly stable and secure area compared with other parts of Iraq. However, incidents such as the Feb. 15 attack could change international perception of the region.



A volley of approximately 14 rockets hit Erbil international airport and nearby residential areas, killing a civilian contractor and injuring up to nine people. (Reuters)

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is all too aware of this possibility. "Our concern is primarily due to the fact that Kurdistan is not used to this kind of attacks and instability," Safeen Dizayee, head of the Foreign Relations Department of the KRG, told Arab News.

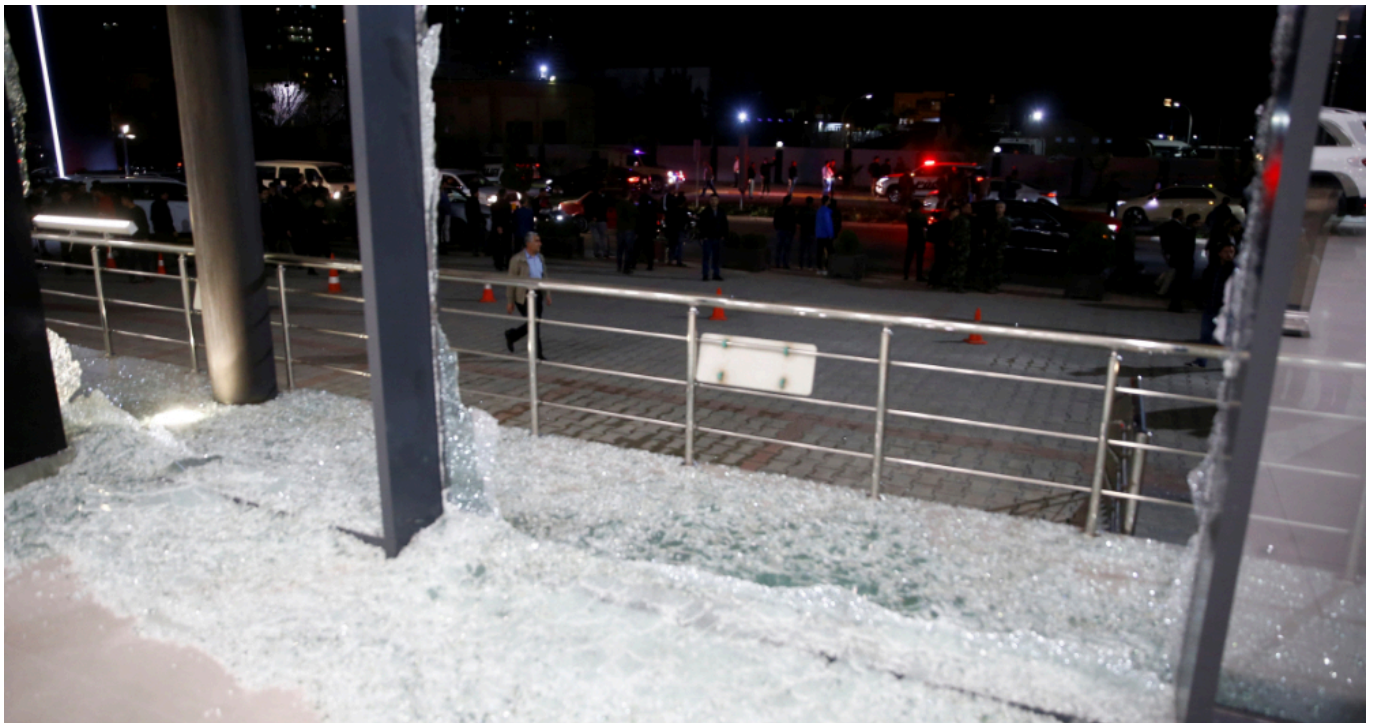
"Kurdistan has been renowned for its stability; coexistence; economic and political development; and prosperity. Therefore, when such incidents occur, it is of concern to the community, to the government, and to all those who live here, and also to our friends elsewhere."

Dizayee asserted that the relevant department of the KRG will "continue to provide utmost security and will work hard to find the culprits and perpetrators of this attack, as well as those who we believe are responsible for the last couple of attacks."

At the same time, he stressed the importance of stronger cooperation between KRG and federal security forces for the prevention of such incidents in the future.

Significant security gaps between the federal forces' positions and the Kurdish Peshmerga in disputed territories, such as Kirkuk and Sinjar, have been known to since late 2017. Daesh and other actors, whom Dizayee described as "loose guns who behave outside the control of the state," have exploited these gaps.

Among the actors in question are militias that operate under the broad umbrella of the Iraqi state-sanctioned and predominantly Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi (PMF), but whose loyalty primarily is to Iran and its interests in Iraq. These groups have used attacks against American troops repeatedly in recent years ostensibly as a pressure tactic to force a US military pullout from Iraq.



Some security analysts have questioned why the US has reacted angrily to the targeting of its forces, yet has neither announced nor taken any retaliatory action. (Reuters)

Pollock believes that tensions in the security gaps between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the PMF in "seam" areas around Kirkuk and Sinjar are "probably part of the story."

"It's noteworthy that many high-level statements from various KRG, UN and Iraq government officials now repeat calls for better security coordination in those places," he said.

Some security analysts have questioned why the US has reacted angrily to the targeting of its forces, yet has neither announced nor taken any retaliatory action. Pollock says that in any event, the Irbil latest attack will serve "to strengthen US resolve to stay in Iraq, including Kurdistan."

His views are echoed in part by Nicholas Heras, director of government relations at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington D.C., who believes it is “within character” for Iran-backed groups to want to test US resolve through attacks.

In addition, Heras suspects that the latest attack could be a warning from the powerful Iraqi Kata’ib Hezbollah militia, which has targeted American troops in Iraq in the past, to the KRG against cooperating with Turkey.

“How much Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) controls these shadowy militias, or even a group like Kata’ib Hezbollah, is a point of strong disagreement among analysts,” he told Arab News.



Osamah Golpy thinks the fact that the rockets were launched from a location close to Irbil and struck residential areas for the first time suggests that Iran-backed militias believe that US military personnel in Iraq are increasingly relocating to the Kurdistan region. (Reuters)

He said some analysts believe that following the US elimination of the Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, the IRGC has had trouble keeping the shadowy armed groups under its control.

But others think that these groups are merely a front for Kata’ib Hezbollah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, providing them the “plausible deniability” they need to harm US interests in Iraq with impunity.

Still other analysts believe that “the ecosystem of Kata’ib Hezbollah groups in Iraq is all just different heads of the hydra, with the body being the IRGC,” Heras told Arab News.

Osamah Golpy, a senior editor at the Rudaw Media Network in Erbil, says that while Iran may not have directly orchestrated the attack on Irbil, this is something it wanted to happen. He cites a Kurdish proverb that he says sums up Tehran’s position: “I wish it happens (I wholeheartedly want it to

happen), but not at my hands.”

He pointed out that a media network close to the IRGC recently released a video clip with an actor depicting Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani as helplessly weak in the face of Daesh’s threat to Irbil in 2014, only to be saved by a heroic Soleimani. The KRG has denounced the video.

Tehran claimed that that the video did not necessarily represent its view, even though Iran’s media is strictly censored and heavily controlled by the regime.

“I believe we should look at the attacks within the same framework,” Golpy told Arab News. The scenario he describes is one in which Iran’s authorities officially deny having any links to the groups launching the rockets even though they are aware of who they are and their intentions.

Golpy also does not rule out the possibility that Iran is directing some of these groups’ actions through the Quds Force, which is one of five IRGC branches specializing in unconventional warfare and military intelligence operations

In his opinion, the fact that the rockets were launched from a location close to Irbil and struck residential areas for the first time suggests that Iran-backed militias believe that US military personnel in Iraq are increasingly relocating to the Kurdistan region.

Put simply, Golpy says, the militias are seeking to “create a similar atmosphere here in Irbil to the one they created in Baghdad.”

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



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Houthi offensive 'risks new humanitarian crisis in Yemen'

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-16 22:51

AL-MUKALLA: Yemen is on the brink of another humanitarian crisis as the Iran-backed Houthis press ahead with their large-scale offensive on the central city of Marib, where more than 750,000 displaced people have sought shelter, UN and Yemeni officials warn.

Mark Lowcock, the UN's humanitarian chief, has warned against the impact of the Marib attacks on people who have fled fighting in their hometowns.

"An assault on the city would put 2 million civilians at risk, with hundreds of thousands potentially forced to flee – with unimaginable humanitarian consequences. Now is the time to de-escalate, not to add even more to the misery of the Yemeni people," the UN official said in a Twitter post on Tuesday, without mentioning the Houthis.

Earlier this month, the rebel militia resumed a major military offensive on Marib, the last stronghold for the internationally recognized government in the northern part of the country and an oil and gas-rich city, sparking heavy fighting with army troops and allied tribesmen that claimed the lives of hundreds of combatants on both sides.

Escalating fighting has forced hundreds of people who live in displacement camps near the battlefields to flee to other shelters inside Marib.

Echoing UN concerns about the humanitarian situation in the city, Yemeni government officials and aid workers say the Houthi offensive has triggered a new wave of displacement from Marib's Serwah area as the rebels seek to break government defenses.

"I saw today four families cramming into one car and fleeing fighting in Al-Zor in Serwah," Yahiya Hussein, a local air worker in Marib, told Arab News by telephone on Tuesday.

Dozens of families are still heading to Marib's cramped camps to escape the fighting, he added.

Hussein, who fled Houthi-controlled Sanaa in 2016, said that militia attacks on displacement camps have increased in the past two weeks and large explosions have forced many people to flee.

"People here are hungry. They live in panic and fear, and have no jobs," he said.

Unlike many lawless Yemeni areas, Marib has enjoyed peace and stability since early 2015, becoming a major haven for hundreds of thousands of people who fled the fighting and Houthi repression.

Local and international aid workers have warned that the Houthi invasion of Marib will trigger a huge displacement from the city to the other government-controlled areas or neighboring countries.

Hussein said that only pressure from international organizations on the rebels can save the city and country from disaster.

"International organizations and right groups should seriously and strongly intervene by pressuring the Houthis to stop their offensive on Marib," he said.

Fighting intensified on all fronts in Marib on Tuesday after a brief lull the previous day as government forces pushed back militia attacks and made limited gains in the Serwah area.

Yemen's defense ministry said that army troops and allied tribesmen engaged in heavy fighting with the Houthis, halting the rebels' progress.

Arab coalition warplanes carried out several sorties, targeting Houthi military reinforcements heading to Marib battlefields, the ministry said.

Airstrikes by coalition warplanes have tilted the balance of the war in favor of government forces and stopped militia advances in Marib and other battlefields.

Several Yemeni MPs have called on the government to withdraw from the Stockholm Agreement and resume a military offensive on the western city of Hodeidah to ease rebel pressure on government forces in Marib.

Mohsen Basurah, deputy parliamentary speaker, said the Houthis are pushing ahead with their offensive on Marib despite suffering heavy casualties.

He urged the Yemeni president to launch a general mobilization and move military units from liberated areas in southern Yemen to Marib to shore up government forces.

"History will not forgive us if the Houthi enter Marib," Basurah said on Twitter on Monday.



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Houthi offensive on Marib threatens prisoner swap talks, says government minister UN Yemen envoy demands rebels halt Marib attack

[Houthi snipers accused of targeting children in Taiz](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-16 22:53

LONDON: Houthi snipers have been accused of “systematically” shooting hundreds of children in the Yemeni city of Taiz.

The Rassd Coalition said as many as 450 children have been killed or wounded in the city in the past six years, and the Houthis have deliberately targeted them.

The human rights group said it denounced such “crimes against humanity,” and urged the UN and its special envoy to Yemen to launch an investigation to “expose such crimes and violations” and bring the perpetrators to justice.

An example of a child being shot by a Houthi sniper is the case of 8-year-old Ruwaida Saleh, who was shot in the head in August 2020 while collecting water

in the Kalaba district of Taiz.

In a BBC documentary, Ruwaida's uncle Hamid Saleh said she was attacked by a Houthi sniper who, according to the Rasd Coalition, refused to let anyone come to her aid, continuing to fire as she lay dying in the street.

"When she fell, her brother Amri was next to her," Hamid said. "He was strong, brave. He tried to drag his sister to the footpath on the other side, and then she was rushed to the hospital.

"Of course, she was in a very bad condition. Thank God, she had two operations. She stayed in the intensive care unit for about four or five days, in a coma. She is stable now, somehow."

Saleh bin Saleh, Ruwaida's father, told the BBC that her health "is getting better but she can't sleep because her head hurts. She is still sick. When she tries to sleep, she can't, and she always shakes her head. Ruwaida is scared. Whenever she hears a sound she thinks she will be shot again."

As well as showing disturbing images of Amri dragging his sister's body to safety, the BBC documentary also shows footage of children playing in the street outside Ruwaida's house, including several "playing dead" as if also being shot at by snipers.

In another segment, BBC journalists were forced to run to the house of a second family affected by the conflict in Taiz, under threat of being fired at by Houthi snipers.

Abdu Qaid Ahmed's 10-year-old son Saber was killed in 2020 by a sniper while out with his brother, also fetching water for his family.

"He (the sniper) shot Saber first," Ahmed said. "The bullet entered through (his chest) and went out his back. He died very quickly."

Mohamed, Saber's 7-year-old brother, was shot by the same sniper in the stomach but was able to return home, where he hid.

His mother Fatiya said: "When I came and took the blanket off him, I saw he was bleeding. I screamed and screamed and screamed. Then my neighbors came and took him from my arms.

"Then I was screaming 'bring me Saber, bring me Saber, I'm sure Saber is afraid I will beat him because he took his brother with him.' They told me he was in the morgue."

Fatiya said Mohamed had been left permanently scarred and traumatized by the event, always hiding when he hears gunfire, and with serious behavioral issues.



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[Turkey dodges EU tax blacklist as critics slam corruption](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-16 22:47

JEDDAH: Turkey is facing increasing pressure over its tax status after the EU granted an extension to demands that Ankara meet its tax transparency guidelines.

If Ankara fails to harmonize its tax policy in line with EU requirements, it could be placed on a tax haven blacklist if member states reach a consensus.

Brussels has criticized Turkey for failing to meet international standards on the automatic exchange of tax information, including tax transparency and prevention of tax evasion.

Turkey, which was already granted until the end of December 2020 to fix the issue, is on the EU's gray list of offenders that includes other countries required to reform their tax policies.

However, some EU countries, including Austria, France and Greece, refused to give more time to Turkey. But Germany granted the extension, citing reasons of "political expediency."

The EU tax haven blacklist, which was drafted in 2017, will be updated in October this year.

The bloc is trying to improve international tax governance by tackling tax evasion through illegal non-payment or underpayment of taxes. It is also tackling tax avoidance through the use of legal means to minimize tax liability, and money laundering in third countries.

EU efforts involve listing non-EU countries that encourage abusive tax practices in order to push them toward reforming legislation. Once they enact reforms, they can be removed from the list.

The Turkish opposition has also questioned the government over irregularities in its tax reforms.

The government granted the "gang of five" construction companies – Cengiz, Kalyon, Limak, Kolin and Makyol – tax incentives and exemptions 128 times over the last decade.

However, concessions given to companies with close ties to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party have stirred debate among the public, with many saying that it represents a double standard as the majority of citizens must pay a disproportionate amount of tax.

"Tenders are being handled without any supervision. Irregularities and corruption go unpunished. This is why they don't care about the law anymore. The system is corrupted," Murat Agirel, a dissident journalist who was recently jailed for his work, told Turkish media.

However, following legislation alone will not prove sufficient for Turkey to align with EU tax regulations. Turkish "front" companies, designed to take part in government contract bids and ensure that a specific company is guaranteed to win a tender, recently made headlines in the country.



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