

3 jailed journalists released amid tough media landscape in Turkey

Author:

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ANKARA: After spending almost six months behind bars, orders for the release from prison of three Turkish journalists accused of disclosing national security secrets were issued on Wednesday.

Critical news site Oda TV's editor-in-chief, Baris Pehlivan, reporter Hulya Kilinc and dissident Yenicag newspaper columnist Murat Agirel were behind bars for reporting on the death of a Turkish intelligence officer in Libya in February, although the agent's name had been previously publicized in a speech by a lawmaker in the Turkish Parliament.

They were released with travel restrictions, with appeals for their sentences pending.

Pehlivan, who faced physical assault during his detention period, said during his testimony that the trial was an attempt to punish his journalistic work.

"No one should doubt this: We will keep writing for a just future, starting where we just left off," he said.

However, not everything is rosy in the country's media sector, where 20 journalists faced trials this week, with free speech increasingly under restriction and censorship in the face of eroding judicial independence from political interference.

Four other defendants who were tried over terror charges on the same day in Istanbul for their journalistic activities in the leftist pro-Kurdish Ozgur Gundem newspaper had their trial adjourned until Dec. 24, while the trial of two other journalists affiliated with the socialist Etkin News Agency (ETHA) was deferred to Dec. 22 as they did not attend the hearing.

A local journalist, Oktay Candemir, was briefly detained on Monday in the eastern province of Van for allegedly "defaming a dead person's memory" under Turkish Penal Code Article 130 for a critical remark made on social media about a popular Ottoman-era television series shown by the state-run TRT channel. He was released on Wednesday on probation.

Reporters Sans Frontiers ranks Turkey 154 of 179 countries on its World Press Freedom Index, placing the country among the world's leading jailer of journalists.

"The AKP government has long pushed media magnates into submission and has intimidated journalists who strive to keep their autonomy from political pressure," Berk Esen, assistant professor of political science from Sabanci University, told Arab News.

"That is why the government has targeted the few independent voices left in the country, especially when they cover controversial stories that challenge the government propaganda," he added.

According to Esen, in such cases, journalists are investigated and kept in prison for several months to break their resolve and send a message to their colleagues not to follow their path. Independent reporting on Turkey's military campaigns in Libya and Syria as well as corruption cases in Turkey are generally off limits to journalists.

An Ankara court on Sept. 8 rejected the appeal against the custody of Oda TV Ankara News Editor Muyesser Yildiz, who was imprisoned in June over espionage charges. She was accused of revealing state secrets in two articles about Ankara's military involvement in Libya.

"Obviously, the room available for independent journalists has shrunk further as the regime turned more authoritarian over the last few years. There are very few independent media venues left in the country as a result and most are owned by foreign media groups that still have room for independent journalism," Esen said.

However, he added, these tactics had not completely stifled investigative reporting in the country.

"In contrast to post-communist regimes in Eastern Europe and Balkans, Turkish media has a relatively strong tradition of investigative and critical journalism that goes back decades. Those reporters who follow this tradition can still find room in online venues, international media, and the few independent newspapers left in the country," Esen said.

At the same trial, another dissident journalist and Oda TV news director, Baris Terkoglu, was acquitted of disclosing information related to intelligence operations, and judicial control measures on him were lifted.

Terkoglu's lawyer, Kazim Yigit Akalin, said it was a "bitter victory" after the unfair captivity he faced.

"From the very beginning, these journalists didn't disclose anything secret. Even a parliamentarian gave a detailed description of the slain agent during his press briefing. Oda TV only covered the funeral after 13 days. Nobody could have explained why they remained behind bars over something that was already disclosed," he told Arab News.

According to Akalin, the journalists were arrested because authorities wanted to silence Oda TV.

"Everything that Terkoglu and Pehlivan wrote in the past was disturbing the judiciary. They triggered the reflex of the judicial authorities about their critical journalism. They are brave boys; they don't care anything but journalism. It explains everything, I assume," he said.

Turkey's Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu made a bitter press statement about Terkoglu on Thursday. "I am not the man of someone like you, the man of the

other; I am the man of this nation. It is also clear who you are, with whom you are hiring and whom you are serving as a servant," he said.



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[‘Historic’ Palestinian factions’ reconciliation meeting puts smiles on faces](#)

Thu, 2020-09-10 23:04

GAZA CITY: The general secretaries of the Palestinian factions held an “historic” reconciliation meeting in Beirut, nine years after a similar get-

together in Cairo ended in fall out and disagreement.

Last week's gathering, chaired virtually by President Mahmoud Abbas from Ramallah, included 12 factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), in addition to Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Smiles, friendship, and courtesy were in plentiful supply, producing a generally optimistic outlook from the meeting, even from polar-opposite political rivals Fatah and Hamas.

Secretary-general of the PLO's executive committee, Saeb Erekat, told Arab News: "The meeting represents an historic event, and an important step on the road to achieving the unity of the Palestinian political and struggle position, and the embodiment of political partnership and agreement on clear work mechanisms and a timetable to end the division, which weakens the Palestinian position in the face of challenges."

Husam Badran, head of national relations for Hamas and a member of the organization's political bureau, told Arab News that staging the meeting had been a necessary step in bringing sides together.

It had been an important and long-awaited event brought about as a result of "detailed discussions between Hamas and Fatah about what is to come, and the dangers facing our national cause," he said.

"We believe, in Hamas, that our unity as Palestinian people with all its components give us more power, and we are talking about the Palestine Liberation Organization in this context, which we believe is the inclusive home for all Palestinians.

"But it should include everyone with all the factional components, civil society institutions, and balanced national figures," Badran added.

Erekat said that Abbas' approval of committees' recommendations from the meeting was a key mandate and clear confirmation of the Palestinian leadership's interest in the success of the unity mission.

Delegates set a five-week timetable for committees to finalize the recommendations and present them to the next meeting that, according to Erekat, would be attended by the secretaries of the factions, members of the PLO executive and central committees, and political and religious figures.

The committees discussed the three main issues of peaceful popular resistance, the national and political project, and political partnership and the rebuilding of the PLO.

Since the split in 2007, the PLO file has remained an obstacle to the success of many of the understandings and agreements signed by the two factions.

Badran said the presence of a strong, unified PLO representing all Palestinians would block the road to "stalkers" and close the door to parties that justified their policies by claiming "the Palestinians are not represented by anyone."

In the new positive atmosphere of cooperation, a ministerial delegation consisting of five ministers from the West Bank visited the Gaza Strip to follow up on efforts to contain the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Gaza.

However, political science professor, Ibrahim Abrash, told Arab News that the success of last week's meeting would be judged on results rather than the smiles of the leaders.

He said that correcting the Palestinian reality required "continuing efforts from everyone, and not only meeting the secretary-generals of the factions or waiting for the outputs of the committees that have been formed."

Hani Al-Masri, a political analyst and the director general of the Masarat center for policy research and strategic studies, said while some Palestinians remained skeptical about the true intentions of the meeting the gathering in itself had been significant and a step on the road to strengthening fragile Palestinian unity.



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Iran fuels humanitarian crisis in Yemen, says foreign minister

Thu, 2020-09-10 22:53

AL-MUKALLA: The internationally recognized government of Yemen has once again accused Iran of undermining security in Yemen and other countries by supplying arms and funds to its allied militias.

Speaking at a virtual Arab League session on Wednesday, Yemeni Foreign Minister Mohammed Al-Hadrami said the Iranian regime poses a grave threat to stability and security in the Arab world and that the Iran-backed Houthi militia fuels his country's worsening humanitarian crisis.

"Iran has caused great harm to Yemen and the region, as it uses the wealth of its people to arm and finance a militia outside its territory to blatantly interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries," the Yemeni minister said, adding that his government has sought a peaceful solution to end the Houthi coup against the internationally recognized government and the Houthis' military expansion in Yemen.

Yemeni governments have long accused Iran of arming and financing the Houthi rebellion in Yemen that has claimed thousands of lives.

Following the interception of arms shipments to the Houthis, the Yemeni government have asked the international community to impose harsher sanctions on the Iranian regime in order to curb its military support to militias in the region, including the Houthis.

In regard to the Stockholm Agreement, Al-Hadrami stressed that his government would not allow the Houthis to take advantage of a truce in the western city of Hodeidah under the agreement to escalate military operations in other parts of the country, including Marib and Jouf.

"Due to the continuing intransigence of the Houthis, we realized today that the agreement is useless and did not lead to anything. Rather, it turned into a new phase of escalation, exacerbation of the conflict, and increased the suffering of Yemenis," the minister said.

He highlighted threats including the rusting oil tanker in the Red Sea and Houthi looting of humanitarian supplies.

Meanwhile, more than 25 Houthis have been killed and more than 30 others captured since Wednesday morning in the northern province of Jouf, Rabia Al-Qurashi, the Yemeni army spokesman in the province, told Arab News on Thursday.

Backed by hundreds of tribesmen and under air cover from Arab coalition planes, the Yemeni army launched an offensive on Houthi-controlled areas east of Hazem, the capital of Jouf province. The army pushed 15 kilometers into a large desert area in the province after killing and capturing dozens of

Houthis.

“By taking complete control of Al-Nodhoub and liberating neighboring areas, we secured the northern side of the city of Marib from Houthi incursions,” Al-Qurashi said by telephone. A large number of tribesmen from Dahem and Abeda tribes took part in the fighting along with army troops, Al-Qurashi said, adding that the army seized five armed vehicles and coalition aircraft destroyed several others.

In addition to expelling the Houthis from Jouf, military operations in the province are also intended to ease Houthi military pressure on government forces in the neighboring Marib province, Yemeni military commanders say.

Al-Qurashi said that government troops achieved that objective on Thursday by cutting off Houthi supply lines from parts of Jouf.

In the central province of Marib, Yemen’s Defense Ministry said fierce fighting erupted over recent days as the Houthis tried to take control of various areas.

On Wednesday, Yemeni media said that Brig. Gen. Rashad Mohammed Al-Hakimi, commander of 3rd Border Guard Brigade operations, was killed in action against the Houthis in an undisclosed location.



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Iraq reforms stymied by wave of attacks blamed on pro-Iran groups

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-10 01:23

BAGHDAD: War-scarred Iraq hopes to launch reforms and revive its battered economy, but the drive is being derailed by a wave of violence blamed largely on shadowy pro-Iranian groups.

Since Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi took office in May, he has promised to rein in rogue militias, fight corruption and roll out long-awaited restructuring after years of war and insurgency.

But the closer his government gets to its stated aims, the more armed actors with suspected links to Washington's arch enemy Tehran are lashing out, top Iraqi officials and analysts told AFP.

"Every time these groups see us getting close to their military or economic interests, they either launch rockets or propaganda campaigns to distract us," said one senior government official.

Violence was already rising before Kadhimi traveled to Washington last month to meet US President Donald Trump, who was Wednesday expected to announce further troop withdrawals from Iraq. But the situation has only destabilized further.

Late Tuesday, a bomb hit a supply convoy heading to an Iraqi base where US troops are deployed, killing one member of the Iraqi security forces.

On Sept. 3, an attack targeted the Baghdad headquarters of British-American security company G4S. One intelligence official told AFP a drone had dropped an explosive charge on the building.

No faction claimed responsibility, but Tehran-backed groups had accused G4S of complicity in January's US drone strike that killed Iran's top general Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad.

Days earlier, a UN worker was wounded when an improvised explosive device detonated underneath an aid convoy in the northern city of Mosul.

A faction identifying itself as part of the "Islamic resistance" – a catch-all phrase for pro-Iran factions – took responsibility, accusing the UN of using its convoys to transport American spies.

"Your vehicles will burn in the streets of Iraq," it threatened online.

A half-dozen previously unheard-of such factions have made similar threats in recent months under the "Islamic resistance" banner, but officials say they

are a smokescreen.

“Five groups, including Kataeb Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl Al-Haq and others, are behind the recent instability across the country,” an Iraqi intelligence officer said.

These hard-line groups are members of Iraq’s Hashed Al-Shaabi, a state-sponsored network dominated by factions close to Iran and wary of the US.

US officials have made similar accusations, naming Kataeb Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl Al-Haq as the real perpetrators of rocket attacks on American installations in Iraq.

The same groups had accused Kadhemi of plotting against Soleimani when the former was Iraq’s top intelligence official and were furious when he rose to become premier.

They have understood Kadhemi’s pledges to reign in armed groups as an attempt to clip their wings, officials and experts have told AFP.

Beyond escalating rocket attacks, the groups have also ramped up pressure through unconventional media outlets.

Anonymous channels on messaging application Telegram publish taunting warnings of attacks on military convoys well before they happen, deepening a sense of impunity.

The same forums have targeted Iraqi television channels critical of Iran.

Dijla TV was torched last week after the Telegram channels turned on them, and a new wave of threats have targeted Sunni-owned UTV.

The campaign began after the US government seized the website domains of Al-Etejah, an Iraqi television station linked to Kataeb Hezbollah.

The government is not looking for a direct confrontation with these groups, said Kadhemi’s spokesman Ahmad Mulla.

“Instead, we are looking to dry up their funding resources by targeting border crossings,” used for lucrative smuggling from Iran, Mulla told AFP.

Officials knew this could be dangerous. When the PM launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign on Iraq’s porous borders, they braced for the worst.

“They will blackmail officials, threaten their families, mobilize the tribes and maybe even commit assassinations,” one senior official told AFP in July.

Indeed, two anti-government activists were gunned down weeks later in the southern port city of Basra, and tribal violence erupted north of Baghdad.

“We are constantly putting out fires, so we can’t properly focus on the bigger strategy,” another Iraqi official said, about Baghdad’s efforts to reform the state and revitalize an economy hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and

low oil prices.

A third official told AFP that Iraq's Finance Minister Ali Allawi missed his Aug. 24 deadline to submit an economic reform plan to parliament because of the recent tumult.

Last week, Kadhemi set up an anti-corruption council, authorizing the elite troops of the Counter-Terrorism Service to arrest officials usually considered too senior to touch.

His forces also carried out search operations in Basra and Baghdad to seize unlicensed arms, but few have turned up.

Iraqi security expert Fadel Abou Raghif said the situation was "dangerous."

"Ultimately, Kadhemi should open a real dialogue with the spiritual leaders of these groups to avoid a clash."



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After highest virus increase yet, Iraq warns it may 'lose control' UK envoy to Iraq threatened by pro-Iran militias

Morocco extends health emergency as virus cases spike

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-10 01:03

RABAT: Morocco's government on Wednesday extended a medical state of emergency until next month in the face of a sharp rise in coronavirus cases.

"Today, the cabinet approved a project for a decree extending until October 10 the duration of the medical state of emergency to combat Covid-19," Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El-Othmani tweeted.

Morocco's economic capital of Casablanca, with 3.3 million residents, has been under lockdown since Monday, including a nighttime curfew and closure of schools.

Emergency measures were first put in place in March.

Casablanca, along with Marrakesh, had already been subject to a series of restrictions three weeks ago, including beach closures and shortened business hours.

All exits to major cities in the North African country have been closed, with travel only allowed with "exceptional authorization" issued by local authorities.

"We risk being submerged by the virus," Health Minister Khalid Ait Taleb said Sunday. "So drastic measures are in order, otherwise the situation risks spinning out of control in coming days."

With more than 1,000 confirmed cases a day since the start of August, Moroccan media have been critical of the handling of the health crisis.

The authorities blame the spread of Covid-19 in Morocco on people's failure to adhere to health protocols.

The country of 35 million inhabitants has recorded more than 1,400 deaths from coronavirus and over 75,721 confirmed cases.



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Morocco shuts down major cities after spike in coronavirus cases