

# 18 killed in clashes in northwestern Syria

Mon, 2020-08-03 23:44

BEIRUT/JERUSALEM: Clashes between opposition groups and pro-Assad fighters in northwestern Syria on Monday thwarted regime's advance and left 12 pro-regime men dead, a Britain-based war monitoring group said.

Another 17 pro-regime fighters were wounded while on the opposition-led side six fighters died, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The forces loyal to Bashar Assad had launched an attack with artillery and heavy gunfire in Syria's last major opposition bastion, said the war monitor. But the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) alliance, headed by ex-leaders of Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, and their allies reportedly thwarted the advance. Four HTS and two other opposition fighters were killed in the clashes in a rural area of Latakia province, the monitor said.

The HTS-led alliance also controls large areas of Idlib province and slivers of territory in neighboring Aleppo and Hama.

The region they hold is home to some 3 million people, nearly half of whom have been displaced from other parts of the country.

Syria's 9-year-old war has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced nearly half of the country's pre-war population.

The opposition-held area is a regular target of attacks by regime forces and their Russian and Iranian allies.

A Russian-backed regime offensive between December and March displaced nearly a million people in the region.

A Moscow-backed cease-fire agreement in March has reduced violence in the area, but shelling and airstrikes by the regime and its backers continue.

Russian airstrikes on the town of Binnish in Idlib province killed three people from the same family on Monday, according to the Observatory. An AFP photographer saw plumes of smoke rising from the site of the attack.

## **Golan Heights Activity**

The Israeli military said it thwarted an infiltration attempt from Syria early on Monday staged by four suspected militants it accused of trying to plant explosives.

Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman, said Israeli troops earlier spotted "irregular" activity in the Golan Heights. Israeli troops opened fire on the suspected militants, some of whom were armed, after observing them placing the explosives on the ground, Conricus said.

## **HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Forces loyal to Bashar Assad had launched an attack with artillery and heavy gunfire in Syria's last major opposition bastion.**
- **The opposition-held area is a regular target of attacks by regime forces and their Russian and Iranian allies.**

There was no official confirmation that the four suspected attackers were killed but a grainy video released by the army shows four figures walking away from barbed wire marking the frontier. The four then disappear in a large explosion that engulfs the area.

The Israeli military has not said if the four are suspected of ties to Iran or Hezbollah, two Syrian allies. However, Conricus said Israel held the Syrian regime responsible for the incident.

Addressing Likud party lawmakers, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday that Israel “thwarted an attempted sabotage on the Syrian front” and would continue to “harm all those who try to harm us and all those who harm us.”

The incident comes amid heightened tension on Israel’s northern frontier following a recent Israeli airstrike that killed a Hezbollah fighter in Syria. Following the airstrike, the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights was hit by explosives fired from Syria and Israel responded by attacking Syrian military positions and beefing up its forces in the area.

Israel has been bracing for further retaliation and last week it said it thwarted an infiltration attempt from Lebanon by Hezbollah militants, setting off one of the heaviest exchanges of fire along the volatile Israel-Lebanon frontier since a 2006 war between the bitter enemies.



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Israeli military strike likely kills 4 militants from Syria  
Jordan rejects Israel’s settlement decision

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## Syria's air defenses intercept 'hostile targets' above Damascus countryside

Mon, 2020-08-03 23:23

DAMASCUS: Syria's air defenses on Monday intercepted 'hostile targets' above Damascus' southwestern countryside, state media reported.

No details were immediately available and there were no initial reports of damage or casualties.

Earlier, Israel launched air strikes on Syrian military targets in southern Syria late Monday, after thwarting an attack near the Israeli-occupied sector of the Golan Heights.

In Damascus, the state-run news agency Sana said Israeli helicopters rocketed Syrian army positions near Quneitra in the south but caused only material damage. It also said air defenses had gone into action near the Syrian capital.

The Israeli army said its fighters jets, attack helicopters and other warplanes struck Syrian army positions in retaliation for the attempt to lay explosives in the Golan Heights.

"The targets struck include observation posts and intelligence collection systems, anti-aircraft artillery facilities and command and control systems in SAF (Syrian Armed Forces) bases," the army said in statement.

"The IDF holds the Syrian government responsible for all activities on Syrian soil, and will continue operating with determination against any violation of Israeli sovereignty," it said.

Tensions are already high between bitter rivals Israel and Syria.

Last month, Israeli army helicopters struck military targets in southern Syria in retaliation for earlier "munitions" fire toward Israel.

Israel did not directly blame Syrian forces for the munitions fire, but said it held the Damascus government responsible.

And earlier Monday, the Israeli army said it had killed four men laying explosives near the Israeli-occupied sector of the Golan Heights.

"They were inside Israeli territory but beyond the fence," military spokesman Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus told journalists in a telephone briefing.

He said an Israeli commando unit lying in wait attacked the intruders shortly after 11 p.m. Sunday (2000 GMT) with assault rifles and sniper fire backed by air strikes.

"Our estimate is that all four were killed," Conricus said in English, adding that there were no Israeli casualties.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement Monday that "the army thwarted an attempted attack on the Syrian front."

"We don't let our guard down," he said, recalling an incident at the Lebanese border last week that prompted Israeli artillery fire across the frontier, as

well as rocket fire Sunday evening from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip which led to retaliatory Israeli air strikes. Israel will “strike anyone who attacks us or tries to attack us,” he added.



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Israeli military strike likely kills 4 militants from Syria  
Israeli drone crashes in Lebanon amid tensions with Syria

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## [How tepid response to US Census 2020 hurts Arab Americans](#)

Mon, 2020-08-03 22:39

CHICAGO: Nearly half of Arab communities in the US are lagging in responding to the 2020 Census, a trend that could jeopardize their share of a \$675 billion annual funding resource, according to US Census Bureau officials.

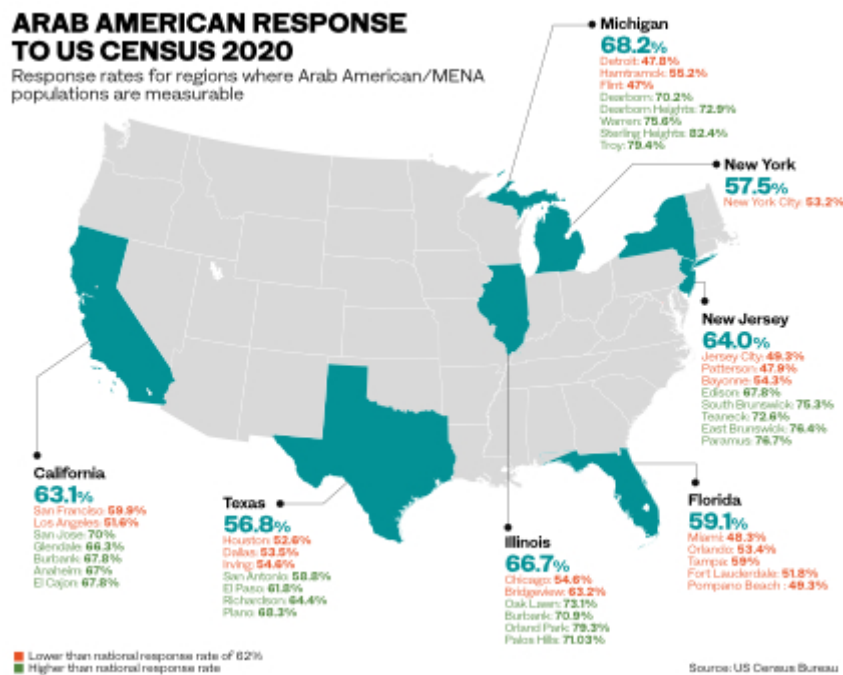
Michael Cook, the chief public spokesman for US Census 2020, said he is

optimistic that the situation will change. Efforts are being made to connect with members of all communities –including, and especially, Arab Americans and others whose origins can be traced to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – and encourage them to complete the questionnaires.

Attempts in the past four decades by Arab Americans to have “Arab” or “MENA” included as an option for race on census forms, to encourage greater participation, have failed. As a result, Arabs continue to fall under the “white” category. Cook said the consequences of failure to fill out the form include a potential loss of funding and lack of recognition.

The overall response rate so far across the US is 62 percent, meaning that 38 percent of the population has yet to complete the census. The rate among Arab Americans in many regions is good, but it has been poor in others.

“If you look at all of the areas of the country in which people of the MENA community are prevalent, that response rate is actually north of the national response rate, in the 70th percentile,” said Cook.



“We are excited about that response but we know that, as good stewards of taxpayer dollars, we want to give everybody the word and encouragement to continue to respond.”

Places where the census response rate among Arab American and MENA populations are below the national average include major cities such as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

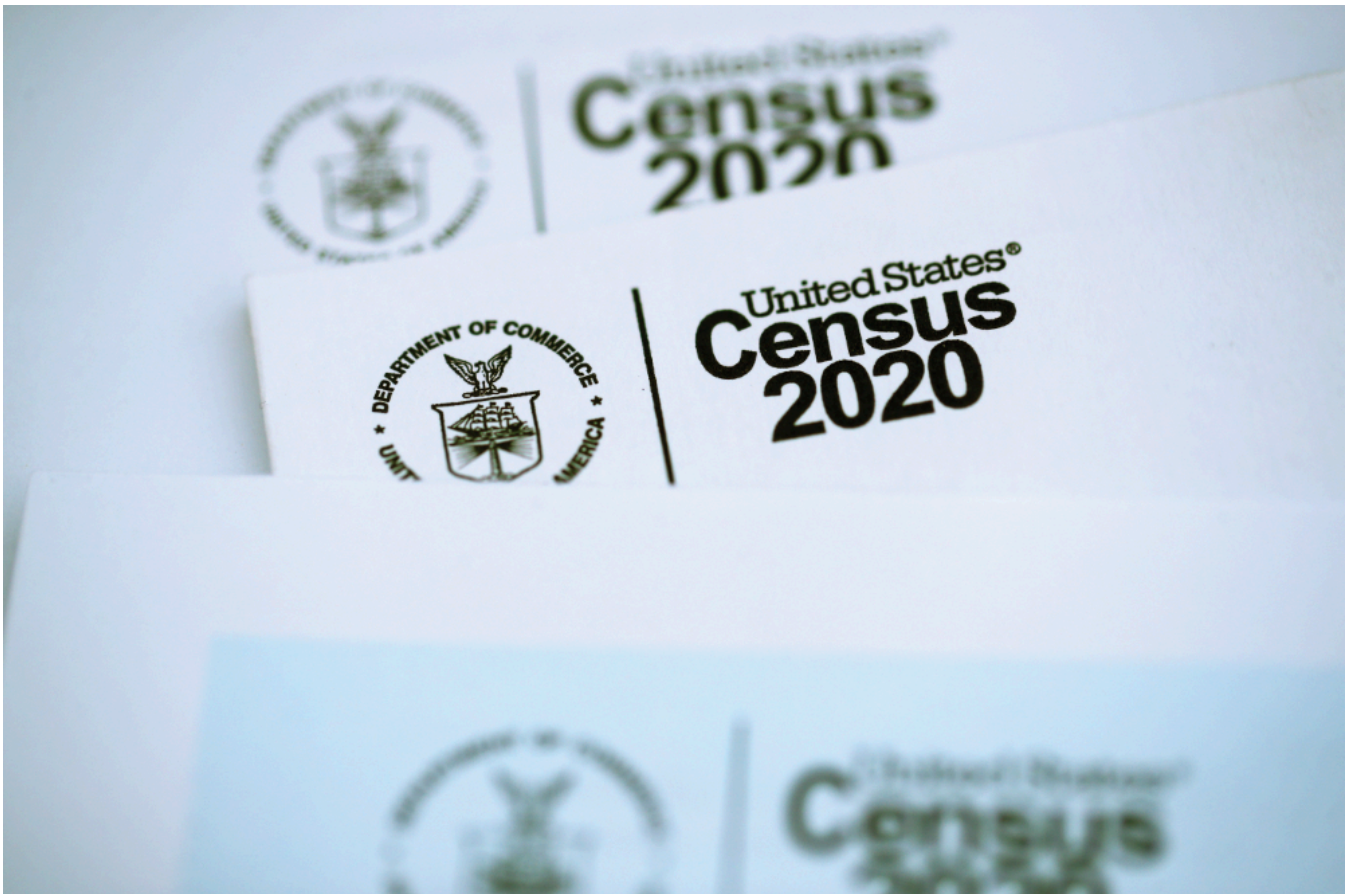
A push is also needed in locations such as Hamtramck and Flint in Michigan; Jersey City, Patterson and Bayonne in New Jersey; Houston, Dallas and Irving in Texas; and almost every major city in Florida, including Orlando, Miami, Tampa, Fort Lauderdale and Pompano Beach.

However, the response in others places, such as Chicago, has been more encouraging.

“When you look at the MENA community, we know which suburbs of major markets have tended to house (Arab/MENA) communities in the past,” Cook said. “This impacts political representation. It impacts the federal funding – \$675 billion every year – going down to the local level for much-needed social services.”

He added that the Census Bureau is continuing its outreach efforts in Arab American and MENA communities. It is hiring people from those communities to conduct follow-up activities to encourage people to complete the forms. It is also partnering with key Arab American organizations to ensure the message reaches as many people as possible.

Imad Hamad, director of the American Human Rights Council in Dearborn, Michigan, is one of those “official partners” working closely with the 2020 Census campaign. He said Arab Americans have a history of concerns about being excluded from census designations.



The US Census logo appears on census materials received in the mail with an invitation to fill out census information online (Getty Images)

While many ethnic and national groups are identified in the 2020 Census, encouraging their participation, efforts to have “Arab” or “MENA” include as official categories have been persistently rebuffed. There are other concerns, too, as a consequence of which, Hamad said, the Census Bureau has connected with some Arab groups but not the wider community.

“The census has not been comprehensive and fully inclusive regarding the allocation of funds and resources,” he said. “Most funds were provided to a select few, neglecting the grass-root organizations that matter and which

have the influence to compel people to participate. It smacked of a selective approach determined by political connections and power.”

Even within the Arab American community there is some disagreement about whether “Arab” should be included as an option on the census.

“Some Arab Americans resist the designation ‘Arab’ as a separate category from ‘white’ on the US census form because they don’t consider themselves a minority,” said Hamad.

“However, Arab Americans are de jure, but not de facto, members of the white majority. They are in limbo – legally considered a part of the white majority, but de facto seen as being in the category ‘other.’”

He also pointed out that Arab Americans can select the “other” category on the census form and write in “Arab” to describe themselves if they want.

“Arab Americans are not perceived by the broad American society as white,” Hamad said. “But since they are legally white, Arab Americans don’t benefit from the classification of minority status, with all the legal and political ramifications that classification entails.”

Despite these ongoing concerns he said that on the whole, Arab Americans have responded well to the census to ensure they are seen, funded and empowered.

“What really matters to the vast majority of Arab Americans is to be counted,” Hamad added.

Hassan Nijem, president of the American Arab Chamber of Commerce in Chicago, works closely with the Census Bureau and the Arab Americans it hires to engage with Arab and Muslim Americans.



Workers of the organization Make the Road New York attend a Census training meeting in Queens on March 13, 2020 in New York City. (Photo by Kena Betancur / AFP)

“There have been some issues,” he said. “Funds have been given mainly to non-Arab organizations and then sub-contracted to only a few Arab American organizations.

“But we have to be active, involved and loud to make sure the Census Bureau hears our voices. The money that can go to the Arab American community is significant, and the political empowerment is critical to ensuring that we have a voice in this country.”

When Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker provided \$20 million to promote the census, little of the money reached Arab American organizations, said Nijem. African American and Hispanic groups were the main beneficiaries of the funds, from which a few thousand dollars were allocated to census-awareness campaigns in the Arab and MENA community, he added.

“We can’t wait for the government to see us,” said Nijem. “We have to be loud and make them see us and include us. More money needs to be spent on the census in the Arab and MENA community. It’s not just good for us, it is good for America.”

The encouraging response to the census by Arab Americans in Chicago might be attributable to a long history of efforts to promote inclusion in a particularly diverse city.

As far back as the 1980s, Anna Mustapha, the only Arab American to have served as a member of the Chicago Board of Education, was recruited by the Census Bureau to promote participation by the Arab and MENA communities.

Ellisa Johnson, the deputy regional director of the Chicago Regional Census Bureau, said the 2020 Census recognizes that Chicagoland has a diverse population that speaks about 124 languages. The bureau has hired census workers who speak 24 of them, including Arabic.

“We have one of the most diverse cities in the country and it is important that Arab Americans are included in everything we do,” she added.

“We want everyone to feel included in the 2020 Census. It is vitally important for the MENA community to make sure everyone is counted, to ensure we have fair congressional representation.”

Census 2020 spokesman Cook said much is at risk in communities that do not complete the census form. Census authorities will attempt to fill any gaps created by lack of responses, but their efforts might yield data that is much less accurate than information provided by those who live in the communities.

“If you don’t do it yourself ... there are processes and procedures in place where we use proxies to get additional information, look at administrative records and try to fill in those gaps,” Cook said.

However, every person completing their own form, he added, “is the best response and the most accurate information, which can be reflected in political representation as well as federal funding.”

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*Twitter: @rayhanania*



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At 90, Alaska Native woman is 1st counted in US Census

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## [Two dead, hundreds affected by chicken contamination in Jordan](#)

Tue, 2020-08-04 00:25

AMMAN: When Abeer Saeed, 40 years old, and her family wanted a shawarma sandwich, they did not expect to end up in the local hospital. Saeed and her husband, two daughters and a niece live in Baqaa camp, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan.

Talking to Arab News from a hospital bed, she said that soon after eating the chicken shawarma, she felt feverish, with sharp pain and diarrhea. The same symptoms were experienced by all other family members as they headed to the

local hospital only to find tens of others suffering from what was believed to be food poisoning.

Mohammad Abed, director of the local Prince Hussein hospital in Ain Al-Basha, told reporters that a 5-year-old child arrived at the hospital with major organ failure. A married man who was unable to find available hospital beds was sent home, but his condition deteriorated, and he passed away.

Prime Minister Omar Razzaz appointed a high-level investigative committee headed by several ministers, including Minister of Research and Higher Education Muhyieddeen Touq, president of the Jordan University of Science and Technology and deputy head of the Royal Scientific Society. The committee was given wide powers to investigate the cause of the problem and to recommend solutions.

Health Minister Saad Jaber said that the child, along with 700 others, had been affected by food poisoning after consuming contaminated chickens. The As-Salt attorney general's office said that the owner of the warehouse that distributed the chickens has been remanded to the As-Salt prison for a week. Nizar Mhaidat, head of Jordan's Food and Drug Administration, said that lab tests showed that the uncooked chicken used for the shawarma sandwich was affected by *Enterococcus faecalis* and *Campylobacter/bacillus cereus* bacteria. Mhaidat said that food inspectors made 500 field visits in which 316 warnings were issued and 74 food enterprises were stopped. In addition, 23 locations were permanently closed with red wax as a result of serious food violations.

## **FASTFACT**

**Food inspectors made 500 field visits in which 316 warnings were issued and 74 food enterprises were stopped.**

He added that 8,500 kg of unusable food have been destroyed and that 59 laboratory specimens were checked in locations throughout Jordan, concluding that the center involved in exporting meat and chicken was the main cause of the food poisoning in Baqaa. Jordan Food and Drug Administration officials confirm that they have no offices in the Baqaa area where the incidents occurred despite the fact that over 100,000 people live in a very cramped facility.

Senior health experts, however, have told Arab News that what happened was not food poisoning but rather contamination.

"What we have here is a clear case of food contamination, possibly as a result of a lack of supervision of the food chain," a senior health source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told Arab News.

The source said that Jordan's food safety standards are compatible with international and, specifically, European standards. The problem appears to be with the partial relaxation of the supervision of the food chain, most likely because health inspectors are overburdened in managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Medical experts in Jordan are confident that the current crisis will pass and that stricter supervision mechanisms will be installed to ensure that the public is protected.



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## [For Iraqi mothers-to-be, hospitals are pandemic no-go zones](#)

Mon, 2020-08-03 01:05

KUT, IRAQ: Iraqi midwife Umm Mariam used to help bring three babies into the world per day. But with mothers-to-be avoiding pandemic-hit hospitals, she now delivers twice that number in her makeshift home clinic.

Across the country recovering from decades of war, health centers face shortages of oxygen supplies and protective equipment even as coronavirus cases soar to almost 130,000, with nearly 5,000 deaths.

Among those infected in the economically battered country, according to official figures, are 3,000 medical staff.

"That's why many women now prefer to deliver their children at my place," says Umm Mariam, speaking from the clinic she has set up at her home in Kut, southeast of Baghdad.

The dire situation is a far cry from the Iraq of the 1970s, which prided itself on one of the best health care systems in the Middle East, by offering free state-of-the-art care to its citizens.

But back-to-back conflicts – from the war with Iran that started in 1980 to the US-led military campaigns and the battle against the Daesh group – have sapped funds used to maintain the system.

For years international sanctions made it impossible to get new medical equipment or even spare parts into the country.

The government still allocates barely 2 percent of its annual budget, which is funded almost entirely by oil sales, to the Health Ministry.

Even before COVID-19 hit this year, Iraq's hospitals were run down, with outdated or broken equipment and staff often poorly trained and overworked.

Mais, 29, is expecting to give birth to her first child in a few weeks. Last year, she could have gone to a public hospital and paid a small, symbolic fee for the delivery.

"But I was afraid of COVID-19, so my gynecologist advised me to go to a private clinic," she said.

## **HIGHLIGHT**

**Across the country recovering from decades of war, health centers face shortages of oxygen supplies and protective equipment even as coronavirus cases soar to almost 130,000, with nearly 5,000 deaths.**

Private clinics are flourishing, but few can afford them – particularly as Iraq's poverty rate is set to double to 40 percent this year, according to a World Bank prediction.

Mais will have to shell out nearly \$1,500, but she feels she has no choice.

"All my friends did the same thing because the obstetric services have been exposed to patients infected with COVID-19," she said.

One of the nine public hospitals in Wasit province, where Kut is located, has been transformed into a coronavirus treatment ward.

The other eight are trying to operate as usual, referring all COVID-19 cases to the specialized facility.

Still, residents are so afraid they will be exposed to the virus that they have largely stopped going to medical facilities altogether.

Mehdi Al-Shuwayli, who heads the local branch of Iraq's medical syndicate, said patient intake has been slashed in half.

"In the first three months of 2020, we carried out 400 surgeries. The next three months, it was just 187," added Qader Fadhel, a surgeon at the public Al-Karama Hospital.

Instead of heading to hospitals, Iraqis suffering from illness and injuries are flocking somewhere else: pharmacies.

"Around 90 percent of my customers describe their symptoms to me so I can prescribe the medication myself, and they can skip going to a hospital altogether," one pharmacist, who preferred to speak anonymously, said.

They then treat themselves at home, skeptical they could even get an appointment in a country with just 14 hospital beds for every 10,000 people, according to World Health Organization data.

France, by comparison, has 60 beds for every 10,000 people. Hospitals are also facing a shortage of oxygen tanks for those severely affected by COVID-19's attack on the lungs. A state-sponsored factory in Taji, north of Baghdad, is struggling to fill the gap. "Every day, we produce 1,000 to 1,500 oxygen tanks for hospitals but we also prepare around 100 for those bedridden at home," says Ahmed Abdelmutlaq, the factory's deputy director. Even for those treating themselves at home, costs can add up. Oxygen tanks, Vitamin C or zinc tablets meant to boost immunity and even some face masks have tripled or quadrupled in price, Iraqis trying out domestic remedies said. Still, they insist, going it alone is a better choice than catching COVID-19 in a dilapidated public hospital.



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Iran reaps the rewards of Saddam's 1990 Kuwait invasion  
Flights between Turkey, Iraq suspended over coronavirus