

Syria missile strike kills 5 pro-Iran fighters: monitor

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BEIRUT: Five pro-Iranian fighters were killed by unidentified missiles on Wednesday evening in Syria's eastern province of Deir Ezzor, a war monitor said.

"Missiles of unidentified origin targeted the headquarters of the 47th Brigade of pro-Iranian militias in the town of Albu Kamal, in the east of Deir Ezzor province, killing five fighters," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Observatory chief Rami Abdul Rahman said drones may have been responsible for the strikes, which caused "loud blasts."

Iran and militias it supports, along with fighters from Iraq and elsewhere, have backed the regime of President Bashar Assad in Syria's eight-year war. Israel has vowed to prevent its regional arch-rival Iran from gaining a foothold in the country and has carried out hundreds of strikes against Iranian targets.

The vast desert province of Deir Ezzor, which neighbors Iraq, hosts several actors in the Syrian conflict besides pro-regime forces.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-dominated armed group backed by the United States, was instrumental in destroying the self-declared "caliphate" of the Daesh group.

Five pro-Iranian fighters were killed in similar raids on the outskirts of Albu Kamal on December 8, the Observatory said.

In September, 28 pro-Iranian fighters including at least 10 Iraqis were killed in similar strikes.

The Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah blamed Israel for that attack, quoting a "security source in Syria."

In June 2018, strikes in far eastern Syria were also attributed to Israel by an American official, on condition of anonymity. The Observatory said they killed 55 pro-regime forces.

Syria's complex, multi-faceted conflict has left more than 370,000 people dead and displaced millions since it began in 2011 with anti-government demonstrations that were brutally repressed.



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Displaced Syrian grows mushrooms to feed family

[How Iran's influence turned into seething discontent](#)

Wed, 2019-12-25 23:15

BEIRUT: The outbreak of protests in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran has shaken the political establishment in Tehran. For decades, the theocracy has thrived on the doctrine of velayat-e faqih, which aimed to mobilize Shiite support across the Middle East under a single Iranian religious and political leadership.

But exporting the Iranian brand of Shiism and expanding the country's geopolitical influence has proven a persistent, uphill battle, and culminated in a huge backlash.

The explosion of anger and frustration in Iran and Iran-influenced countries is the latest and, perhaps, gravest crisis that Tehran has confronted in

recent years.

Brian Hook, the US State Department's Iran envoy, has described its nationwide protests as "the worst political crisis the regime has faced in its 40 years."

Hundreds of protesters were reportedly killed and thousands more arrested, while the government imposed nationwide internet blackouts to prevent media coverage, which drew strong international condemnation.

Over the past decade, the Iranian regime has gained an advantage over its geopolitical rivals in projecting power across a number of countries with religiously mixed populations, notably Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.

In order to export its ideology and consolidate its strategic gains, Iran has had to forge alliances with non-Sunni minorities, such as the Alawites in Syria, Zaydis in Yemen, Ibadis in Oman, Christians in Lebanon and Ismailis elsewhere in the region.

The objective was not only to disrupt the regional balance of power, but also to swing it in its favor, against the Sunni-majority powers. The realignment of the regional order – in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen – was so sharp that it prompted Ali Riza Zakani, an Iranian member of parliament, to boast that Iran had finally captured their capitals.

But now, after benefiting from four decades of revolutionary fervor, Iran's rulers are confronting the challenge of governing the "captured territories." Chief among them is accommodating these countries' ethnic and sectarian diversities.

This reality check has forced Iran-backed Shiite parties in Iraq and Lebanon to pursue a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic model of governance, allowing Iran to cobble together cross-sectarian coalitions and maintain the regional upper hand.

In 2006, Hezbollah forged an alliance with the Christian Maronite party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Together they comprised the March 8 alliance, which included other sectarian political parties.

Both groups aimed to undermine Sunni and Saudi political influence in Lebanon. Their efforts culminated in the imposition of Michael Aoun, the FPM leader, on the country as its president and securing a parliamentary majority in 2018, an electoral victory that followed the gerrymandering of districts and the adoption of an electoral law that primarily favored the FPM.

Likewise in Iraq, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a step that coincided with other Iran-sponsored groups dropping their demands for an Islamic theocracy in Baghdad. Former revolutionaries soon became partners in Iraq's multi-ethnic and confessional power-sharing arrangements.

Tehran's problems have been compounded by the actions of its local political

allies, who have adopted unabashed sectarian rhetoric, maintained their allegiance to the velayat-e faqih and used state resources to advance their political objectives.

In both Iraq and Lebanon, state resources have proven vulnerable to predatory political abuse. Government ministries have been distributed without consideration for merit, while services and contracts have been handed out to party loyalists and politically connected candidates.

The result has been a fragmented and unaccountable elite, members of which have divided the spoils of power generously among themselves.

In 2018, the Fragile State Index measured the stability of more than 178 countries; it placed Lebanon among the “warning states” and Iraq among the “alert states.” Both countries’ elites ranked among the world’s “most fragmented.” Transparency International has also ranked the perception of corruption in both countries as among the highest globally.

Despite the reluctance of the Shiite political parties to embrace the Iranian theocratic model wholesale, both Iraq and Lebanon have proven vulnerable to the velayat-e faqih’s strategy of spawning a state within the state.

The success of Hezbollah and Hashd Al-Shaabi is most evident in their ability to replicate the Iranian-style “duality of power” model by penetrating and subduing their home country’s state institutions whose ethnic and sectarian diversity posed an obstacle of sorts.

Consequently, the governments in Iraq and Lebanon have been denied sole monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force, and forced to accept a parallel system of informal, armed and unaccountable Iran-sponsored institutions.

To be sure, the hardening of US sanctions against Iran and its allies as well as the relative decline of oil prices over the past decade has taken a direct toll on Iran’s economy. The sanctions have additionally put a crimp in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp’s (IRGC) maneuverability in regional battlefields.

Most alarmingly from Tehran’s standpoint, the US moves have opened up a chasm between the economic interests of these countries and the political interests of their Iran-aligned leaders. While the people seek market normalization, integration, and investment, their governments see such measures as the keys to their own demise.



In Lebanon, Hezbollah has long overwhelmed Lebanese government institutions. Its success stems from the ability of its informal military and social welfare networks to secure the loyalty of its sectarian constituents. Its security institutions have overcome the challenge posed by the multi-sectarian make-up of Lebanese society through threats of violence and civil war.

Successive governments have been forced to recognize Hezbollah's right to keep its weapons and stand idly by every time it has chosen to exercise power within the country or entered into a conflict.

In 2008 and 2016, Hezbollah's political dominance enabled it to impose its own presidential nominees, overruling parliamentary majorities. And in 2018, its decisive electoral victory ensured full control over the government.

But Lebanon's dollar-dependent economic system runs broadly counter to that established by velayat-e faqih. Its free market remains tied to Arab states and critically linked to Western support and assistance. Arab oil-generated remittances, deposits and investments have traditionally kept the economy ticking.

In late 2019, Lebanon found itself on the edge of an abyss as its entire economic system faced collapse. Protesters took to the streets to demand the government's resignation and the formation of a government of technocrats.

Hezbollah and its allies went on the defensive as they found the spontaneous public uprising – "Al-Thawra" or revolution – a direct threat to the dual power structure that serves their political objectives so well.

In Iraq, a similar dual power structure encompassing political rivals is to blame for the unraveling of the economy and the administration's dysfunctional state.

Iran's outside influence is seen by large sections of Iraq's population as preventing Baghdad from forging an independent oil strategy or economic policy founded on national interest.

A case in point is the Iraqi government's bungling of a \$53 billion Exxon

deal that aimed to help Iraq boost its oil output in the southern fields. The outcome is seen by ordinary Iraqis as a result of Tehran's dogged opposition to an economic partnership between Iraq and the US.

Meanwhile, Iraqis are resentful over their dependence on Iran for electricity supplies and other commodities. The full extent of their frustration became evident when protesters stormed the Iranian consulate in the southern city of Najaf, replaced the Iranian flag and set fire to the building.

In retrospect, even as Iran succeeded, through its local proxies, to disrupt the balance of political power and marginalize Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, it unwittingly sowed the seeds of sectarian and ethnic discontent in the four predominantly Arab countries. Now it is reaping the whirlwind.



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Iran starts internet shutdown ahead of possible new protests
Family members of man killed during Iran protests arrested -Mehr news agency

Displaced Syrian grows mushrooms to feed family

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Wed, 2019-12-25 17:09

HAAREM: In a camp for the displaced in northern Syria, Nasrallah scatters mushroom spores into a bag of wet hay, hoping they will sprout and feed his family.

"Mushrooms have become the main alternative to meat, as it's so expensive," says the 43-year-old.

After the civil war erupted in Syria eight years ago, Nasrallah started growing the fungi in his home province of Hama.

"We'd eat some, give some away to friends," explains the father of three, who used to work for the local council in the town of Qalaat Al-Madiq.

But earlier this year, increased regime bombardment on the Hama region forced his family to flee north toward the Turkish border.

They found refuge in a camp in the town of Haarem in the northwestern province of Idlib, but jobs there are scarce.

With money tight to support his wife and children, he planted some mushrooms.

"We eat some and we sell a little to provide for ourselves," he says.

Before planting the fungi, Nasrallah sterilizes hay by stirring it in boiling water over a wood fire.

He then layers the wet straw into a bag, sprinkling five to ten grams of mushroom spores between each coating.

Sealing the bag with a tight knot, he lugs it into a dark, warm room and leaves it for around 20 days.

Once the bag has turned white, he transfers it to a slightly brighter room, opens it up, and mists the top regularly until mushrooms sprout out.

"Not many people grow mushrooms, though people – especially in camps – are increasingly turning to them," he says.

Mushrooms are commonly viewed as an alternative to meat in dishes, although they are different in nutritional value. They contain far less protein, but more minerals and vitamins.

Syrians in other parts of the country have also grown them during the war, most notably in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta when it was under a five-year government siege.

Around 6.5 million people in Syria are food insecure, or lack access to sufficient nutritious food.

Many of them have been displaced from their homes by the conflict, the World Food Programme says.

Today, Nasrallah buys a kilo of spores from Turkey for the equivalent of \$10, hoping they will generate 20 kilos of food.

But he spreads out his yield, picking no more than five kilos a week.

Each kilo sells for a little under the equivalent of \$3, far less than the average \$13 per kilo for meat.

Inside the brighter cultivation room, his nine-year-old son, Saeed, watches as Nasrallah carves off a huge sprout of creamy oyster mushrooms from a sack. In the street outside, 65-year-old Umm Khaled takes a quick look at the merchandise and picks it up for a few bank notes. Inside her modest mudbrick home, she chops the mushrooms up and cooks them over a camping stove with some onions and ghee. "To be honest, chicken and meat are better, but we can't afford them," says the elderly woman, who cooks for her son and grandchildren. Gathering around the dishes, she and her family rip up flat bread and dip it into the vegetables instead.





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Aid group says 120,000 fleeing attacks in Idlib

[Iraqis launch boycott of \\$9bn imports from Iran](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-25 01:31

BAGHDAD: Iraqi protesters have launched a new weapon aimed at weakening Iran's grip on their political system – a boycott of Iranian products in stores and markets.

With the slogan "Let them rot," young Iraqis in particular are refusing to buy anything imported from Iran, from fruit and vegetables to cheese and yogurt.

Instead, pop-up markets at protest camps are offering food stamped with "Made in Iraq" labels. "It allows us to create jobs for Iraqis and means our money stays in the country," said protester Hatem Karim, 24. "We must ... support our own national production."

Iran exports \$9 billion worth of products to Iraq every year, 10 times the amount of trade in the opposite direction. A successful boycott would be a significant blow to the Iranian economy, already crippled by US sanctions.

Mass protests have gripped Iraq since Oct. 1 as demonstrators demand an end to Iranian meddling and reform of a corrupt political system that keeps them in poverty. More than 450 people have been killed in an anti-protest crackdown led by Iran-backed militias and directed by Gen. Qassim Soleimani, head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Iraq's parliament approved a new electoral law on Tuesday to make elections fairer, but political deadlock is still holding up the selection of an interim prime minister, threatening renewed unrest.

The new law will allow voters to elect individual members of Parliament instead of choosing from party lists, and each MP will represent a specific electoral district instead of the current system of groups representing entire provinces.

"This decision is the decision of the people, the people who were patient here in Tahrir Square," said Baghdad protester Dawood Salman, 58. "They made their decision known, which is for elections to be individual, 100 percent."

Another protester, Hashim Mohammed, said: “Hopefully this is a sign of things to come, this is the first step toward meeting our demands. We now want ... a president, prime minister, and speaker who do not belong to any political party.”

Adel Abdul Mahdi resigned as prime minister last month under pressure from street protesters, but he remains in a caretaker capacity. The constitutional deadline to name a replacement expired last Thursday.

“We need a true Iraqi, someone honest and honorable,” protester Hashim said.



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Iran arrests family of young man killed in ‘riots’ Iraqi parliament approves new election law, deadlock over PM remains

[Lebanese resort to wheat cultivation amid famine fears](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-25 01:05

BEIRUT: On the eve of the Christmas holidays, shopping malls throughout Lebanon were limited to selling only food.

The country has been hampered by an economic recession and political crisis for more than two months, creating financial and security chaos.

Nicolas, a father of four who owns a toy store in Beirut, said: "Sales are slow. At this time of the year, we usually cannot handle the number of customers, but this year, people are extremely hesitant to buy expensive gifts, and are choosing less expensive ones."

Fear has risen due to analysts and political leaders warning of a possible famine, and the start of 2020 being harsher than recent months.

Head of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt warned that "Jabal (Lebanon's Druze-inhabited mountainous areas) and the entire country are on the brink of hunger" in a voice message sent over WhatsApp to Lebanese living abroad.

Jumblatt suggested some measures to support the party from abroad to address the risks, notably distributing food rations, encouraging wheat, lentil and bean cultivation and providing a stock of medicines.

Members of the party distributed food supplies to the needy in deprived areas. People have started considering alternative crops to address the famine. Imad, a landowner in the Bekaa governorate, said he will start cultivating wheat.

Khadija, Lebanese citizen from a southern village, said the "the municipality of the village has urged all landowners who are currently not using their lands to declare them so that the municipality can cultivate wheat and support the needy."

Caretaker Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil had earlier reassured the Lebanese, stressing that "they have nothing to worry regarding the salaries of public sector employees," despite up to 50 percent of their salaries being deducted due to the crisis and dozens of employees losing their jobs due to bankruptcy.

On Tuesday, the Lebanese lined up outside banks to receive what little is still allowed by the banks' restrictive procedures, where cash withdrawals have been limited to \$100 at some banks.

At a bank in the northern city of Tripoli, tensions soared as clients struggled to withdraw their money on the eve of the holiday.

Some people gathered outside the banks to denounce the policy, which required the intervention of the army and internal security forces to reduce tensions. Some money exchange houses and the black market have been charging rates above the official peg of 1,507 pound to the dollar, and selling it for up to 2,100 pounds.

Hassan Khalil warned two days ago that Lebanon "cannot survive long without a

government.”

He said: “We have covered the state’s claims on time and we have also issued treasury bonds in the Lebanese pound at very low interest rates, which have helped us reduce the deficit, which will increase by more than was previously expected.”

Economic Expert Issam Al-Jurdi said that “the Lebanese have been waiting for signs to be reassured about their money, but silence has increased their fears, pushing them to believe that the matter is much more than a liquidity problem.”

On Tuesday, dozens of students gathered outside the Bank of Lebanon in Beirut to denounce the national economic and financial policies. They distributed flyers carrying the hashtag #We_Are_Not_Paying, urging the Lebanese to stop paying taxes, fees and their bank loans until the restoration of their rights.

In a meeting with Lebanese businessmen, banking expert Nassib Ghobril said that “despite the difficult crisis and restrictive banking procedures, Lebanon is still capable of recovering from the crisis if an effective government starts working on the required reforms program.”

Ghobril added that the crisis is due to “the lack of confidence in the state and a programmed plan to hit trust in the banking sector, creating a serious panic among the Lebanese and pushing them to keep big amounts of money at their homes, which has led to the interruption of liquidity.”

He said: “The situation will only gradually recover with the formation of an effective government that is supported and trusted by the people and the international community and that starts implementing reforms.



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Lebanon banks 'trapping' state salaries: minister
Lebanon's population hits 4.8m with 20% non-Lebanese