

Iraq political deal hands Abdul Mahdi a reprieve in face of mass protests

Author:

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BAGHDAD: Iraq's political forces have signed an agreement that will allow the government of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and the current Parliament to continue to operate until the end of the year. In return, they have pledged to implement a number of demands issued by protesters, including a crackdown on corruption, amendments to the electoral law, changes to the Independent High Electoral Commission and a comprehensive ministerial reshuffle within 45 days, political leaders involved in the talks said on Tuesday.

However, the announcement of the deal, late on Monday, was criticized by protesters as an attempt by the political forces to give themselves some breathing space in the hope that the protests will run out of steam.

Widespread anti-government demonstrations began in Baghdad and nine Shiite-dominated southern provinces at the start of October. Since then, more than 300 people have been killed and 15,000 injured, mainly in Baghdad, by bullets and tear gas canisters during efforts by Abdul Mahdi's government and its allies to suppress the unrest.

Protesters first took to the streets on Oct. 1 demanding action to address corruption, high unemployment and a lack of basic daily services and amenities. This prompted a brutal crackdown by Abdul Mahdi and his Iran-backed armed allies, during which 147 people were killed and more than 6,000 injured. This temporarily halted the demonstrations but protesters returned to the streets on Oct. 24, after domestic and international pressure led to a pledge from security forces that they would not use live ammunition against demonstrators.

When the demonstrations resumed, protesters added a number of new demands, including the resignation of Abdul Mahdi's government, changes to election law, early national parliamentary elections, and the formation of a new electoral commission.

Key Iraqi political forces, especially those backed by Iran, subsequently agreed to meet the demands of the demonstrators, with the exception of the resignation or removal of Abdul Mahdi and the holding of early elections. However, growing internal pressure from the supreme religious authority in Najaf, led by Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Al-Sistani, international pressure from the United Nations and other diplomatic missions in Baghdad, and the high number of fatalities plus an increase in kidnappings and arrests of activists and journalists forced them to reconsider the demands they had rejected.

The political factions signed a written agreement late on Monday, after weeks of intensive meetings, stating that they will meet most of the demands of protesters within 45 days. If they fail to do so by Jan. 1, the government will be dismissed and preparations will begin for early elections, politicians said.

Arab News has seen the agreement, which was prepared and signed by leaders of the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish political alliances. It includes a number of

“recommendations,” the most important of which are to “preserve the structure of the state and its democratic political system, and deepen the principle of peaceful transfer of power through constitutional mechanisms.”

BACKGROUND

- Widespread anti-government demonstrations began in Baghdad and nine Shiite-dominated southern provinces at the start of October.

As part of the obligation on Parliament and the government to implement the demands of the demonstrators within 45 days, a special court must be set up to deal with allegations of corruption and prosecute the guilty, regardless of political positions and affiliations.

Iraq ranks high on the list of the most corrupt countries. The political power-sharing system in the country, which has been in place since 2004, has contributed to the spread of financial and administrative corruption in all ministries and government institutions, and has helped to protect those involved in it.

The signed agreement also states that “political forces are committed to upholding court decisions and not covering up for corrupt officials.” They have pledged not to interfere in the work of ministries and state institutions, and to work on legislation and legal amendments designed to improve the political system and meet the demands of the protesters. Changes to election laws and the Independent High Electoral Commission, including the removal of current commission members, are among the proposed legal amendments. In addition a law will be introduced to abolish the special privileges currently granted to senior politicians and officials.

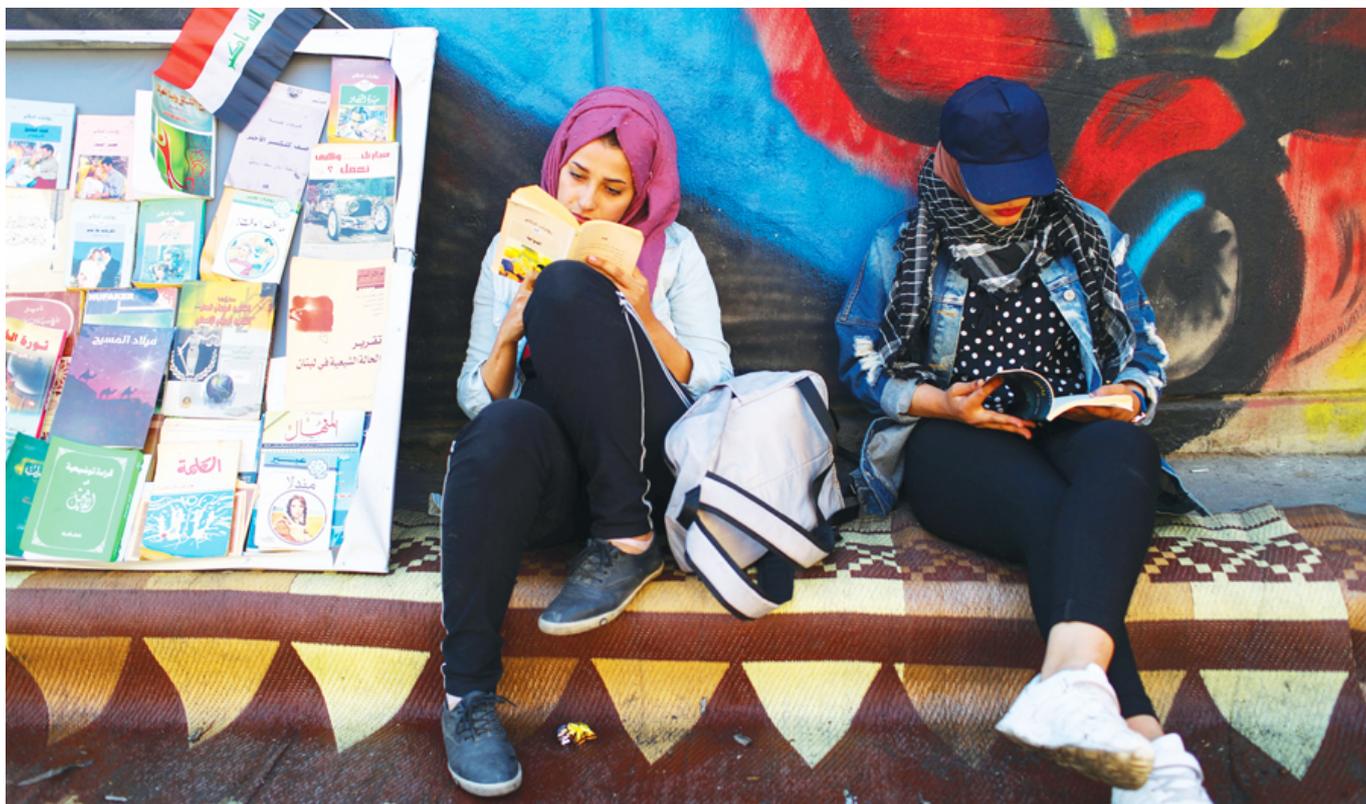
The agreement states: “Political leaders express their full commitment and follow-up to these steps, and if the Parliament or the government is unable to achieve their tasks ... within the agreed times (45 days), they (the prime minister and the speaker of the Parliament) are obliged to move, through their blocs in the Parliament, to alternative constitutional options to meet the demands of the people, by withdrawing confidence from the government or conducting early elections.”

The agreement was widely criticized by demonstrators and observers, who viewed it as the latest ruse by political groups to buy themselves some time in the hope that the protesters will despair and give up.

“What is contained in this agreement is an attempt to circumvent the demands of millions of demonstrators, and has nothing to do with their demands,” said Mohammed Al-Shimary, one of the protesters. “Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish political forces have given Abdul Mahdi everything he needs to legitimize his repression of the demonstrations, and keep their own privileges and thefts.

“This agreement will not (persuade the protesters to give up) and any reasonable person knows for sure that what they have pledged could not be fulfilled in years, let alone 45 days.

“They are playing with fire and will pay for it soon.”



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Iraqi protesters block commercial ports, split capital

[Two Daesh-supporting suspects in Turkey blacklisted by US](#)

Wed, 2019-11-20 02:25

ANKARA: The US Treasury Department has blacklisted two Turkey-based procurement agents helping Daesh and four companies linked to the terror group operating in Syria, Turkey, across the Gulf and Europe by providing logistical and financial support.

The move is linked to government efforts to eliminate and sanction the remaining financial and recruiting networks keeping Daesh alive in the Middle East.

The targets have been chosen in line with US Executive Order 13224, intended to identify terrorists and those who have materially helped or supported them, or offered them financial, material, or technological support.

On the list, Sahloul Money Exchange Company's transfers of thousands of dollars to Daesh operatives in Turkey in 2016 were revealed.

The company was also holding deposits from Daesh-linked people trying to reach Turkey from Syria.

The Turkey-based Ismail and Ahmet Bayaltun brothers are also identified on the list by their material assistance and equipment support for Daesh fighters through their export-import company ACL Ithalat & Ihracat in Sanliurfa, a city just across Turkey-Syrian border.

Some Turkish news outlets had reported four years ago the company's suspicious procurement of aluminum pigments used for producing bombs.

The Turkish company was believed to send this material to Daesh networks in Syria.

Ismail Bayaltun was taken into custody in June 2015 over the reports that Daesh fighters received freight shipments from Turkey that were sent with "Bayaltun" inscribed on the packages.

Just a month later, Daesh carried out a bloody suicide bomb attack in Suruc, in the southeastern Sanliurfa province, where a total of 34 people were killed and 70 were seriously injured.

The report said that all property and interests in the possession of Ismail Bayaltun in the US or that are in the control or possession of US persons are blocked and should be reported to the Treasury Department.

"Persons that engage in certain transactions with the individual designated today may themselves be exposed to sanctions or subject to an enforcement action," the report underlined.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The move is linked to government efforts to eliminate and sanction the remaining financial and recruiting networks keeping Daesh alive in the Middle East.
- The Turkey-based Ismail and Ahmet Bayaltun brothers are identified in the list by their material assistance and equipment support for Daesh fighters.

The siblings, the No.1 suspects in the report, still have public social media accounts.

Their blacklisted outfit is registered as an electronic equipment and materials company, and they also claim to produce industrial equipment. According to Colin Clarke, an expert on terror financing networks with the Soufan Group, the recent moves by the US Treasury against companies and individuals linked to Daesh is a positive development, but in no way will

this eradicate the financial and logistical sources of the group.

“We are likely to see Daesh focus even more on raising, storing, transferring and laundering funds in order to keep its operational capabilities robust,” Clarke told Arab News, adding: “The US will need to cooperate with a range of stakeholders, including both countries in the region and private sector entities to continue to identify and track Daesh movements of money.”

More than 300 people have lost their lives in Daesh-claimed attacks in Turkey.



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Over 600 Daesh affiliates surrender to Afghan forces
Germany arrests woman, accused of joining Daesh, on return home

[Lebanon protesters block MPs as street battles erupt](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-11-20 03:08

BEIRUT: Lebanese protesters set up roadblocks to prevent MPs reaching Parliament on Tuesday, accusing lawmakers of planning legislation that could offer amnesty to corrupt officials.

Amid angry scenes, protesters fought running skirmishes with riot police and formed human shields as they succeeded in shutting down Parliament for a second week.

Protesters took to the streets on Oct. 17 amid widespread anger over tax increases and government corruption, forcing Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign 12 days later despite backing for the Lebanese leader from President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah.

Since then the country's powerful political blocs have been reluctant to form a new government of nonpolitical experts, as protesters have demanded. No new prime minister has been selected to form a government.

In order to accept his reappointment to form a government, Hariri stipulated that the new leadership should consist only of technocrats – a key protesters' demand – while Aoun and his allies insist that the government should be techno-political.

After Tuesday's clashes outside Parliament, Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri said: "The situation is very dangerous. We are facing deadlock in the formation of the government."

Army and internal security forces were deployed at road junctions leading to the Parliament on Tuesday amid unprecedented control measures.

Security forces established camouflaged corridors to allow deputies access. Hezbollah deputy Ali Ammar arrived on motorcycle after passing through a throng of protesters chanting "thieves."

MP Mohamed Nasrallah from the Berri bloc also arrived on foot.

Escorts for Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil's convoy fired shots in the air to keep protesters at bay. He managed to reach Parliament, but the shooting angered demonstrators, who hurled rocks at the car.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Army and internal security forces were deployed at road junctions leading to the Parliament on Tuesday amid unprecedented control measures.
- Escorts for Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil's convoy fired shots in the air to keep protesters at bay. He managed to reach Parliament, but the shooting angered demonstrators, who hurled rocks at the car.

Protesters tried to remove barbed wire barricades in an attempt to break into Parliament's perimeter, but were fought back by security forces.

"How can they not hear our demands until now?" shouted one protester, Marwa.

"We have been on the street for more than a month and they do not see us.

They want to continue exercising power as usual. We will not allow them, even if it leads to our death."

Protesters in Riad Al-Solh and Martyrs' squares banged metal pots and chanted anti-government slogans.

"They are thieves and looters of public money. They want to take refuge in a general amnesty law that we will not allow them to pass," said one.

Some parliamentary blocs decided to boycott the session “out of respect for the will of the people,” MP Dima Jamali said on Twitter.

More than 60 deputies from the Future Movement, Lebanese Forces, Phalange, Marada Movement, former leader Najib Mikati’s bloc and the Democratic Gathering bloc joined the boycott.

With only four deputies present, Secretary-General of the Parliament Adnan Daher announced the postponement of the session after two hours.

MP Nasrallah said the Parliament was “doing its duty to serve the protesters through an agenda of draft laws and proposals to serve the demands of the movement.”

Activist Mahmoud Fakhri told Arab News that protesters will continue to push the authorities to set a date for “binding parliamentary consultations to appoint a prime minister and form a national salvation government from technocrats and not from known political faces.”

He said: “The movement is under pressure and may be exposed to more pressure over time,” he said. “We know the authorities may try to turn us against each other. We should be aware of this.”



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Gina Rodriguez turns heads with the help of Lebanon’s finest Banks in Lebanon reopen amid security increase

Iraqi protesters block commercial ports, split capital

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Tue, 2019-11-19 17:31

BAGHDAD: Anti-government protesters blocked access to a second major commercial port in southern Iraq on Tuesday, as bridge closures effectively split the capital in half, causing citizens to rely on boats for transport to reach the other side of the city.

Since anti-government protests began Oct. 1, at least 320 people have been killed and thousands wounded in Baghdad and the mostly Shiite southern provinces. Demonstrators have taken to the streets in the tens of thousands over what they say is widespread corruption, lack of job opportunities and poor basic services, despite the country's oil wealth.

Security forces have used live ammunition, tear gas and stun guns to repel protesters, tactics that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Monday would be punished with sanctions.

"We will not stand idle while the corrupt officials make the Iraqi people suffer. Today, I am affirming the United States will use our legal authorities to sanction corrupt individuals that are stealing Iraqis' wealth and those killing and wounding peaceful protesters," he said in remarks to reporters in Washington.

"Like the Iraqi people taking to the streets today, our sanctions will not discriminate between religious sect or ethnicity," he added. "They will simply target those who do wrong to the Iraqi people, no matter who they are."

Over a dozen protesters blocked the main entrance to Khor Al-Zubair port, halting trade activity as oil tankers and other trucks carrying goods were unable to enter or exit. The port imports commercial goods and materials as well as refined oil products.

Crude from Qayara oil field in Ninewa province, in northern Iraq, is also exported from the port.

Khor Al-Zubair is the second largest port in the country. Protesters had burned tires and cut access to the main Gulf commercial port in Umm Qasr on Monday and continued to block roads Tuesday.

Iraqi civilians are increasingly relying on boats to ferry them across the Tigris River as ongoing standoffs between demonstrators and Iraqi security forces on three key bridges has shut main thoroughfares connecting east and west Baghdad.

The Jumhuriya, Sinak and Ahrar bridges, which have been partially occupied by protesters following days of deadly clashes, connect both sides of the city by passing over the Tigris River. The blockages have left Iraqis who must make the daily commute for work, school and other day-to-day activities with no choice but to rely on river boats.

"After the bridges were cut, all the pressure is on us here," said Hasan

Lilo, a boat owner in the capital. "We offer a reasonable transportation means that helps the people."



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Iraqi grand ayatollah: I support the people, and they want change

[Algerian court jails protesters over election](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1574170146253501400

Tue, 2019-11-19 13:15

ALGIERS: An Algerian court has jailed four protesters for 18 months for

disrupting a candidate's campaign for the Dec. 12 presidential election which is opposed by a mass protest movement.

The court sentenced the four on Monday after protests on Sunday in the western city of Tlemcen, where one of the five candidates, Ali Benflis, was campaigning. No details were available on what their exact actions were. Algeria's authorities are trying to quell a protest movement that erupted in February to demand the departure of the country's ruling hierarchy, an end to corruption and the army's withdrawal from politics.

The army, which has emerged as the most powerful institution in the country, has pushed for next month's election as a means to end the protests and restore normality. The former president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, quit in April. The judgment comes a week after a series of other prison sentences were handed down to protesters who had raised flags with Berber symbols during earlier demonstrations.

Several opposition leaders have also been held during the protests, and charged with contributing to damaging army morale.

However, the authorities have also detained numerous current and former senior officials on corruption charges, and have jailed some of them including the once untouchable former intelligence chief.

The protesters have rejected any presidential election carried out now, saying the continued presence of Bouteflika allies in the upper echelons of the government mean it cannot be free or fair.

Human Rights Watch said last week that the arrest of scores of protesters looked like "part of a pattern of trying to weaken opposition to Algeria's interim rulers and their determination to hold presidential elections."



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Algeria kicks off presidential campaign, 5 candidates to run
Iconic Algerian raï singer Cheikha Rimitti gets square named after her in Paris