

Iran-backed Iraq leaders agree on 'road map'

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BAGHDAD: Iraqi politicians have agreed on a "roadmap" to resolve the current crisis and meet the demands of demonstrators, prominent allies of Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi told Arab News on Monday.

Changing the prime minister's administrative and military team, a ministerial reshuffle involving more than half the Cabinet, changing electoral laws and the members of the electoral commission are the most prominent points of the proposals, negotiators said.

Baghdad and nine southern Shiite-dominated provinces have seen mass protests since October 1 against corruption, unemployment and a lack of basic services.

More than 250 demonstrators have been killed and more than 11,000 wounded, most of them in Baghdad, in a brutal crackdown led by Abdul Mahdi and his allies.

The demonstrations, the largest of their kind since 2003, are the first in which Shiite protesters represent have come out against the government, also largely Shiite.

Demonstrators, who returned to the streets last Friday in larger numbers after being stopped for two weeks over killings and arrests, have widened their demands to include the overthrow of Abdul Mahdi and early parliamentary elections, preceded by an amendment to the election laws.

After intense meetings over the past few weeks, Iranian-backed political forces agreed to a package of resolutions aimed at calming demonstrators and pleasing the supreme religious authority in Najaf, which has declared its full support for the demands.

The proposed road map, which includes dramatic changes in the composition of senior government staff, does not include any mention of early elections or the resignation of Abdul Mahdi within the options or solutions on the table.

"With our conviction that Adel (Abdul Mahdi) is not fit to remain as prime minister for another week ... we will not allow his dismissal or resignation now," a prominent ally of the government told Arab News.

"We believe that keeping him as prime minister is a must now, because his fall means we will have to change a prime minister every six months.

"Agreeing on early elections is long story that needs Sunnis and Kurds involved, and this is difficult to achieve in short time."

Sacrificing Muhammad Al-Hashemi, the head of the prime minister's office, is

the most significant change that will affect the Abdul Mahdi's personal team.

"Everyone knows that Abu Jihad (Al-Hashemi) is the actual prime minister and is responsible for half of the devastation caused by the government until today," one source told Arab News.

"If 'Abu Jihad' gets out of the prime minister's office, everything will be fixed."

Al-Hashemi, or "the bulldozer," is a prominent leader in the Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council and former director of the office of the late Shiite leader Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, the most prominent leader of the Iraqi opposition during the rule of Saddam Hussein.

Al-Hashemi, one of the chief negotiators of the pro-Iran Al-Binna'a Alliance, the second largest parliamentary bloc to name the prime minister and form the government in 2018, is credited with getting Abdul Mahdi into office.

"Abdul-Mahdi is tired and weak and his team is in chaos. In addition, 'Abu Jihad' enjoys the full support and confidence of the Iranians. This opened the door wide for 'Abu Jihad' to expand his powers.

Dismissing Al-Hashemi and other senior officials of Abdul Mahdi's office is part of the proposed plan presented by Gen. Qassim Suleiman, commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and commander of field operations in Iraq, after returning from Najaf Saturday evening following a meeting with a representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, spiritual leader of Iraq's Shiites and the most influential cleric in Iraq, who seen as the godfather of the political process since 2003, key negotiators told Arab News.

Suleiman's plan also lists a Cabinet reshuffle, combined with a package of important new laws and amendments.

"We are racing against time. The situation is very critical and we have no more than a week or two to implement what we have agreed to calm the people and please Najaf (Al-Sistani)," a political ally of Abdul Mahdi told Arab News.

"Our priority was to exclude the threat of Shiite-Shiite fighting from the equation, and with the return of Muqtada Al-Sadr to Qom and the intervention of Najaf, this threat is now over."

Suleiman, who has absolute influence over the majority of Shiite political forces and armed factions, arrived in Baghdad on Thursday and asked to meet Al-Sistani to "calm tensions" between Al-Sistani and Iran's supreme religious leader, Ali Khamenei.

"Things are heading for calm. Najaf almost approved the plan, but the demonstrations will continue because Najaf wants them (protesters) to remain as well as the Americans, but there will be some kind of truce."

Influential Shiite cleric Al-Sadr, who has the largest parliamentary bloc and biggest armed faction with millions of followers, also announced his adoption

of the protesters' full demands two weeks ago, and vowed to protect them from any threats.

Demonstrations in the provinces of Amara and Dhi Qar, Al-Sadr's southern stronghold, have witnessed bloody clashes between demonstrators and armed factions, including the Badr Organization and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, the most powerful Shiite groups.

Suleimani, after leaving Najaf, met Al-Sadr and asked him to go back to Qom, in Iran, which he left a week ago at the request of the Iranian authorities in response to the abuses committed by his followers against the demonstrators.

"Sadr was seeking bloodshed and his removal from the scene was necessary," one Shiite source told Arab News.

A senior aide to Al-Sadr told Arab News on condition of anonymity: "All that was said about Al-Sadr's meeting with Suleimani and the agreement between them is not true, and Al-Sadr, wherever he is, will not sell Iraq or sell what he believes in."

Al-Sistani, meanwhile, will monitor the steps to implement changes in Iraq, "but will not loosen his grip on Abdul Mahdi or his allies," a source told Arab News.

"Najaf supports any measures to reform the situation in accordance with the constitutional contexts. Keeping Abdul Mahdi with his weak government now ensures that the demonstrators' demands will be met in a few weeks, because they (his allies) are desperate to defend him, and this will lead them to make more concessions."



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[EU condemns new burst of Israeli settlement approvals](#)

Tue, 2019-11-05 01:11

JERUSALEM: The EU has criticized Israel's advancement of over 2,000 new homes in West Bank settlements.

In a statement on Monday, the EU reiterated its longstanding position that all settlement activity on occupied land is illegal and "erodes the viability" of the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Israeli anti-settlement watchdog group Peace Now says Israeli authorities approved various planning stages for the construction of 2,342 new housing units in the occupied West Bank last month.

It says Israel has already pushed forward plans for over 8,300 settlement homes this year – an increase of 5 percent over all of 2018.

Israel's Foreign Ministry declined comment, and COGAT, the defense body that authorizes settlement construction, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The EU statement came as the Israeli police said an enquiry had been opened and officers suspended after a video emerged online apparently showing a border guard shooting a Palestinian in the back with a sponge-tipped bullet. Israel's Channel 13 had broadcast the video on Saturday evening, showing border guards – part of the Israeli police – telling a Palestinian to turn back at a West Bank checkpoint on the edge of Jerusalem.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967.
- Three million Palestinians live in the territory, alongside more than 400,000 Israelis in illegal settlements.
- Israeli checkpoints are key points of friction.

As the man walks away, his arms raised, one of the officers fires a sponge-tipped bullet, ammunition generally used for crowd control but which can be

lethal at short distances.

The man instantly falls to the ground, shouting in pain.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said the Justice Ministry had opened an investigation into the incident, which he said took place a year and a half ago.

“As soon as the incident became known the female border police officer was removed from duty,” he said.

“The other border policemen who were there were also removed and some of them were transferred from their positions.”

On Sunday, the Palestinian Liberation Organization slammed Israel over the incident and urged the UN to act.

“The video shows the extent of blind hatred and Zionist racism,” it said.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967.

Three million Palestinians live in the territory, alongside more than 400,000 Israelis in settlements seen as illegal under international law. Israeli checkpoints are key points of friction.



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Jordan, Israel reach deal to free 2 Jordanian detainees Israel may charge policewoman who shot Palestinian in back

Sudan PM talks of peace on maiden trip to Darfur

Author:

Tue, 2019-11-05 01:03

AL-FASHIR: Sudan's Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok said on Monday his government was working toward bringing peace to war-torn Darfur as he met hundreds of victims of the conflict who demanded swift justice. Hamdok's one-day visit was his first as prime minister to the devastated region, where a conflict that erupted in 2003 has left hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced.

He met victims of the war in the town of Al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur state, which houses several sprawling camps where tens of thousands of displaced have been living for years.

"We want justice! Send all criminals of Darfur to the ICC (International Criminal Court)," chanted a crowd who met Hamdok as he visited camps in Al-Fashir, an AFP correspondent reported.

Hamdok assured them that his government was working toward peace in Darfur, a region of the size of Spain.

"I know your demands even before you raised them," Hamdok told the crowd.

"We will all work together to achieve your demands and ensure that normal life returns to Darfur," he said as the crowd chanted "No justice, no peace in Darfur!."

The Darfur conflict flared when ethnic minority rebels took up arms against the then-government of since-ousted president Omar Bashir, accusing it of marginalizing the region economically and politically.

Khartoum then applied what rights groups say was a scorched earth policy against ethnic groups suspected of supporting the rebels – raping, killing, looting and burning villages.

About 300,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million displaced in the conflict, the UN says.

FASTFACT

Sudan's Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok met victims of the war in the town of Al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur state, which houses several sprawling camps where tens of thousands of displaced have been living for years.

Bashir, who the army ousted in April after nationwide protests against his rule, has long been accused by the Hague-based ICC of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity for his alleged role in the conflict.

"We want those criminals to be given to the ICC. Without that there won't be peace in Darfur," Mohamed Adam, a prominent leader representing the victims of Darfur, told Hamdok.

The protest movement that led to the ouster of Bashir said it was not against handing over the deposed autocrat to the ICC.

The military generals who had initially seized power in the aftermath of Bashir's fall have refused to deliver him to The Hague. Sudan's current transitional authorities would need to ratify the ICC's Rome Statute to allow for the transfer of Bashir to the court.

"We have no objection in handing over Bashir to the ICC," said Ibrahim Al-Sheikh, a leader of umbrella protest movement the Forces of Freedom and Change.

"All the members of the Forces of Freedom and Change agree on that."



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South Sudan faces crisis in forming new coalition government
Sudanese protests demand answers over June crackdown deaths

[Palestinians wait as elections edge closer](#)

Tue, 2019-11-05 00:58

GAZA CITY: As Palestinians await further developments on talks of possible elections, the positive noises emanating from Hamas and President Mahmoud

Abbas have not put minds at ease. Abbas met with Hamas's approval last week to hold legislative polls no more than three months before the presidential election.

For the second time in seven days, the Central Election Commission (CEC), headed by Dr. Hanna Nasser, met with Hamas and other Palestinian leaders in Gaza to brief them on Abbas's position and to discuss further details.

But it is enough worry many Palestinians who recall many failed past experiences, the most important of which was the Egyptian-sponsored reconciliation agreement in 2017 and the municipal elections that were agreed upon and were supposed to take place two years ago.

The overdue polls come amid the backdrop of recent electoral stalemates in Israel, and the political upheaval in Lebanon.

Ibrahim Abrash, a professor of public law and political science, told Arab News that talk about successful elections in Palestine was "premature" given so little progress had been made in the recent past.

The CEC's actions came in response to a call for a general election launched by President Abbas on Sept. 26, which, Abrash believes, was due to "people pressure" rather than any actual desire to go to the polls.

"The political class and parties do not want to hold elections, and every party is satisfied with his hand," he said, adding that a genuine and sincere intention to go to the polls would require national dialogue sessions to agree on the electoral laws, and to establish mechanisms and procedures to ensure a healthy, transparent and fair election.

"Without this, the elections will fail, and the ordinary Palestinian will be the one who suffers."

BACKGROUND

Central Election Commission Executive Director Hisham Kuhail said legislative elections would need 120 days following the issuance of the presidential decree, and that the public should 'therefore expect the elections in February 2020.'

Legislative elections have been held twice previously in Palestine, the first in 1996 for the Legislative Council and the Presidency following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and the second in 2006, preceded by the presidential elections in 2005 following the death of President Yasser Arafat.

The former presidential candidate and head of the National Initiative Movement, Mustafa Barghouti, identified several obstacles that could hinder Palestinian elections, notably Israel's refusal to allow them to be held in occupied Jerusalem, its arrest of candidates in the West Bank, and the potential collapse of the current national talks, and the failure of Hamas to allow elections in Gaza.

Barghouti told Arab News that the current movement was a "precious opportunity" that should be treated as a form of popular resistance to the stale state of Palestinian politics, that, if successful, could lead to elections that reflect the will of the Palestinian people.

Following the meeting with the CEC on Sunday, Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh said

that the talks discussed details that would ensure a successful electoral process.

Talal Abu Zarifa, a member of the political bureau of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, said that ensuring the holding of elections and respecting their results called for the provisional leadership framework to be convened to discuss electoral law, especially full proportional representation, as well as discussing the issue of freedom of candidacy. CEC Executive Director Hisham Kuhail told Palestine Radio that legislative elections would need 120 days following the issuance of the presidential decree, and that the public should “therefore expect the elections in February 2020.”



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[**Egypt army kills 83 militants in North**](#)

Sinai

Author:

Tue, 2019-11-05 00:53

CAIRO: Egypt's army said on Monday it had killed 83 militants in clashes in the restive Sinai Peninsula, where a Daesh affiliate has waged a long-running insurgency.

Security forces killed 77 extremists, who were found with stacks of weapons and ammunition in north and central Sinai, the army said.

Six other "highly dangerous" militants were killed in shootouts in the region, the army said in a statement on a nationwide anti-militant operation between Sept. 28 and Nov. 4.

About 61 "criminals, wanted individuals and suspects" were arrested, it said. Security forces also destroyed dozens of hideouts and vehicles as part of the ongoing operation, according to the statement.

Security

Egypt has for years been fighting an insurgency in North Sinai that escalated after the military's 2013 ouster of the then-president following mass protests.

In February 2018, the army and police launched a nationwide operation against militants, mainly focused on North Sinai.

The operation also targets other areas including the Western Desert along the porous border with Libya.

The latest army figures brings the death toll of suspected militants in the Sinai region to more than 830.

About 60 security personnel have been killed since the start of the offensive.

Following the death of Daesh chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi late last month, the group's North Sinai affiliate has pledged allegiance to his successor, Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Quraishi.



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Egypt kills 15 militants in North Sinai shootout: ministry
Egypt officials: Attack kills 3 soldiers, 3 militants in Sinai