

Iraqis maimed in battle struggle to survive as amputees

Author:

SALAM FARAJ | AFP

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BAGHDAD: Karrar Hassan, 25, is just one of tens of thousands of Iraqi fighters wounded battling the Daesh group. Now disabled, he struggles to survive on a \$400 pension.

In 2014, he was unemployed and joined the Hashed Al-Shaabi, a paramilitary coalition dominated by Iran-backed groups that fought alongside Iraqi government forces against the jihadists.

Months later, during fierce fighting for the city of Fallujah west of Baghdad, his left calf was ripped open by a blast and Karrar lost the leg. The Hashed sent him for treatment to both Iran and Lebanon, and he returned with a prosthesis from the knee down.

This gave him enough mobility to allow a return to the front.

In 2015, Karrar was fighting in Baiji city, north of the capital, when he was hit again.

This time two bullets shattered his right knee, putting him out of action once and for all.

Iraq declared victory over Daesh in December 2017, after a gruelling three-year onslaught that also wounded tens of thousands of fighters.

The Hashed says it lost 8,000 men in the war on Daesh, and 26,000 were wounded.

Iraq's government, which mobilized tens of thousands of members of the security forces for the campaign, has not given its own toll.

Karrar, a father of three small children, has been left incapacitated.

Unemployed and now unable to drive, he spends his days at home trying to figure out how to provide for his family on a monthly pension of 500,000 Iraqi dinars (\$400).

This amount represents a bit less than a medium salary in Iraq, but for Karrar it is not enough to buy medicine for his injuries as well as food for his wife and three children.

He says the ointment he needs to rub on his skin to avoid chafing from the prosthesis "costs \$800" and lasts for 10 months.

Karrar would like to work, "but with my legs I can't even drive a taxi" or carry anything heavy.

Abu Mehdi Al-Mohandis, second-in-command in the Hashed, says hospitals run by the paramilitary unit provide free medical care for 60,000 fighters and 300,000 civilians.

Dhia Hussein runs Al-Razi hospital for the Hashed in Baghdad, where he says 1,450 amputees have received treatment over the past six months alone.

Iraq has a long history of bloody conflict, from the 1980-1988 war with its neighbor Iran to the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein and to the later struggle against Daesh.

Each conflict has resulted in a heavy toll of casualties, many of whom are amputees.

Tahssin Ibrahim has been making prosthetic limbs in Baghdad for more than 30 years.

He says the number of amputees has risen since the 2003 conflict, and the number of workshops specializing in prostheses and shops selling medical equipment has increased tenfold over the past 15 years.

Most of Ibrahim's clients are war wounded, and he says many are forced to borrow money to pay for their artificial limbs.

The most rudimentary prosthesis costs around \$1,000 in Iraq – more than twice the average monthly wage.

Ahmed, 32, was deployed with the federal police to second city Mosul, one of the jihadists' main hubs before they were driven out by a fierce offensive that lasted for months.

An Daesh mortar blast tore through his right leg, and Ahmed says his pension of 575,000 Iraqi dinars is simply inadequate.

Every month, half of this goes toward "paying for medical treatment," including doctor's visits and medicine, leaving him with just half to buy food for the family. That "is not enough."

A doctor's visit also means a taxi fare, he said.

"The bus is not adapted for handicapped people so I have to take a taxi," said the father of four.

One doctor who spoke to AFP, Ghassan Al-Alussi, believes that the pensions allocated to war veterans are "insufficient."

"Public and health institutions must do more for amputee fighters because they have defended the country," Alussi said.



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[Cut off by Israeli wall, Palestinian family declares 'republic'](#)

Author:

AFP

Wed, 2018-01-31 07:24

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RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories: The logic of an Israeli wall north of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank appears clear – on one side Palestinians, on the other the Israeli settlement of Beit El.

But look carefully and you will see a small gap in part of it leading into a courtyard where the Palestinian Jumaa family live.

The newly-built part of the wall which stretches along the road next to the settlement has left the 25 members of the extended family on the opposite side to the rest of the Palestinian town of El-Bireh.

They are, they say, partially cut off from the outside world, sometimes having to cross through an Israeli checkpoint just to buy milk and bread.

"The wall separated us from the people and from Palestinians. I feel I am inside the settlement, even though I am Palestinian," said Hossam Jumaa, 54 and a father of eight.

"Now we live alone."

At the house, the children of the three families play in the shadow of the six-meter wall, while their vegetable plots run toward the barrier.

The family said they were informed three years ago by Israeli authorities that they would extend the wall along the road, leaving them on the other side.

But they say construction increased after US President Donald Trump's December 6 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, which led to widespread protests and the Palestinian government freezing ties with the US administration.

The Palestinians see east Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, which they say is being rapidly eroded by Israeli settlement growth throughout the West Bank.

"The work used to be at night, but after the protests broke out in the Palestinian territories following the American decision to recognize

Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the work was done in the day," Hossam's brother Hakim, 50, said.

The Israeli defense ministry said in a statement the wall was necessary "following a significant number of gunfire incidents from vehicles toward the Beit El community."

"The barrier does not harm any private land, does not block access to houses and does not change anything on the ground," it said.

"There is no harm to Palestinians or their land."

The wall cutting off the Jumaa family is different from Israel's controversial separation barrier sealing off the West Bank from Israel. Israel began building the barrier in 2002 during the bloody second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, arguing it was necessary to stop Palestinian attackers.

According to the United Nations, around 65 percent of the separation barrier has so far been constructed, with more than 80 percent inside the West Bank. The UN says it "impedes access to services and resources, disrupts family and social life (and) undermines livelihoods."

The wall affecting the Jumaas ranks among the barriers, fences and private security protecting West Bank settlements.

More than 400,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank.

The UN says their existence and growth on land supposed to form a future Palestinian state is one of the largest obstacles to peace.

Palestinians are banned from entering settlements except in exceptional circumstances, and there are near-constant tensions between them.

Settlers have been the regular target of violent attacks by Palestinians.

Hardline settlers on the other hand have attacked Palestinians.

The Jumaa family said they have asked for support from Palestinian politicians to oppose the wall but have had little help.

Hossam said being on the opposite side of the wall brings new fears.

In the early 1990s, he said, they were subject to an attack by settlers in which their windows were smashed.

"Now, after we became inside the wall, we are scared of attacks by settlers at any moment."

A nearby street is also used by the army, with the family worried of bumping into them late at night.

They say their children can no longer go to school or the shops alone without fear.

"We don't see anyone any more," seven-year-old Miriam said.

The family have increasingly little hope, instead taking to dark humor.

"Today we are independent. We will call ourselves the Great Republic of Jumaa," Hakim joked.



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[Rocky Syria talks in Russia end, ignore key opposition demands](#)

Author:

Reuters

Tue, 2018-01-30 05:43

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SOCHI, Russia: A Syrian peace conference in Russia ended on Tuesday with a statement calling for democratic elections, but ignoring key opposition demands after a day marred by squabbles and heckling of the Russian foreign minister.

The participants also agreed to set up a committee to rewrite the Syrian constitution at the conference, which much of the opposition said aimed to serve the interests of President Bashar Assad and his close ally, Moscow.

A final statement said Syrians must decide their future through elections, but did not say whether Syrian refugees would be allowed to take part, something sought by Assad's opponents and Western states. Syrians had the "exclusive right" to pick their political system free of foreign intervention, it added.

It also urged the preservation of security forces without calling for their reform, another demand of the opposition.

"This conference is tailor-made for Assad and his terrorist regime," said Mustafa Sejari, a senior official in a Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel group that operates in northern Syria. "The Sochi statement does not concern us and is not even a subject of discussion."

Russia hosted what it called a Syrian Congress of National Dialogue in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. After helping turn the tide of the war in Syria in Assad's favor, Moscow has cast itself as a Middle East peace broker.

The event was boycotted, however, by the leadership of the Syrian opposition, while powers such as the United States, Britain and France stayed away because of what they said was the Syrian government's refusal to properly engage.

Western countries support a separate United Nations-mediated peace process, which has so far failed to yield progress toward ending a war that is entering its eighth year. The latest round of those talks took place last week in Vienna.

"We don't need a new process, we don't need any competitive process," UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, who attended the Sochi conference, told reporters in New York by phone on Monday.

He said the constitutional committee agreed in Sochi "will become a reality in Geneva," where most of the UN-led Syria peace talks have been held. De Mistura also said he would decide the criteria for committee members and select about 50 people – from government, opposition and independent groups. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov helped open the Sochi conference on Tuesday by reading out a statement from President Vladimir Putin saying the conditions were ripe for Syria to turn "a tragic page" in its history. But some delegates stood up and began heckling him, accusing Moscow of killing civilians in Syria with its air strikes.

The incident was broadcast on Russian state TV where two security guards were shown approaching one man in the audience indicating that he should sit down. Other delegates shouted out their support for Russia.

FLAG ROW

In a further setback, one group of delegates, which included members of the armed opposition who had flown in from Turkey, refused to leave Sochi airport until Syrian government flags and emblems – which they said were offensive – had been removed.

Ahmed Tomah, the head of the delegation, said his group had boycotted the congress and would fly back to Turkey because of the flag row and what he called broken promises to end the bombardment of civilians.

"We were surprised that none of the promises that were given had been kept, the ferocious bombing of civilians had not stopped. Nor were the flags and banners of the regime removed," he said in a video recorded at the airport. Artyom Kozhin, a senior diplomat at the Russian Foreign Ministry, acknowledged there had been some complications.

“Some problems have arisen with a group of the armed opposition that has come from Turkey which has made its participation dependent on additional demands,” he wrote on social media.

Lavrov had spoken by phone twice to his Turkish counterpart and been told that the problem would be resolved, said Kozhin.

Turkish and Iranian government delegations also attended the congress.

Vitaly Naumkin, a Russian expert on the Middle East who serves as an adviser to de Mistura, told reporters the problems encountered by organizers had not tarnished the event.

“Nothing awful happened,” said Naumkin. “Nobody is fighting anyone else. Nobody is killing anyone. These were standard working moments.”



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[Suspected Russian warplanes hit busy market in Idlib, kill 15](#)

Author:

Reuters

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AMMAN: At least 15 people were killed on Tuesday when suspected Russian warplanes struck a crowded market in the rebel-held city of Ariha in the

second such strike on a shopping area in opposition-held Idlib within 24 hours, residents and rescuers said. They said the aircraft were flying at high altitude, which differentiates it from aging Syrian airforce. The opposition-run Civil Defense service said a further 20 people were wounded in the strike. Video released by local activists showed extensive damage, with produce mixed up with human parts. Reuters could not verify the authenticity of the footage. A resident said the attack took place at the busiest time of the day. Russia's defense ministry regularly says it is attacking hard-line Islamist militants. It denies opposition and witness accounts that its warplanes target market places, medical centers and residential areas away from frontlines. Syrian media made no mention of the strikes. Civil Defense workers and residents said dozens of raids have since Sunday struck the towns of Khan Sheikhoun, Maarat al Numan, Saraqeb and scores of villages. On Monday, warplanes bombed a potato market in nearby Saraqeb, killing at least 11 people, mostly farmers and traders. Shortly after that warplanes knocked out of action the only public hospital in the city, which was supported by French charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). MSF said in a statement the attack on the hospital killed at least five people, including a child, and injured six. It said this was the second strike on the hospital in just over a week. Russia has escalated its strikes in Idlib in recent months, throwing its military weight behind a Syrian military campaign to push deeper into the mainly rebel-held northwestern province. (Reporting by Suleiman Al-Khalidi)



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Palestinian, Israeli ministers meet after US Jerusalem move

Author:

AFP

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JERUSALEM: Senior Palestinian and Israeli officials met at a ceremony Tuesday in the first high-level encounter since US President Donald Trump's controversial recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Palestinian economy minister Abeer Odeh and Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon attended the inauguration of a new cargo scanner at the Israeli-controlled Allenby Bridge border crossing between Jordan and the West Bank. The new device will enable 200 containers to cross between Jordan and the Palestinian territory a day instead of the current 100, Israel's tax authority said in a statement.

Other senior Israeli and Palestinian officials were at the event, as well as a Jordanian representative and Dutch diplomats, whose country donated the new machine.

"I reached the finance ministry after a long period of stagnation in the relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority," Kahlon said in remarks relayed by the tax authority. "We've decided to take responsibility and advance a number of joint projects."

"We have many plans to continue our financial cooperation with the (Palestinian) Authority," Kahlon said at the ceremony.

Kahlon noted that he will be meeting with Palestinian prime minister Rami Hamdallah in Jerusalem on Sunday as part of their efforts to advance "a number of joint projects."

Hamdallah and Kahlon meet regularly to discuss economic and infrastructure issues. Their last talks took place on October 30.

Their Sunday meeting will be the first since Trump pledged on December 6 to move the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, breaking with the policies of his predecessors.

Outraged Palestinian leaders said the US could no longer play the role of peace broker and called for the suspension of their recognition of Israel, a move that has not been implemented.

The United States meanwhile withheld \$65 million of funds earmarked for the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA.

Palestinian officials did not confirm the Israeli report on the meeting.

Hamdallah is heading for Brussels for an "emergency" meeting Wednesday of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, which coordinates international donor support for the Palestinians.

The Palestinian premier will raise the issue of the financial crisis facing his government and seek funding for Gaza, a government statement said.



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