

Ex-Tehran hostage: 'Blundering' IRGC is 'Iranian'

Sat, 2022-05-21 23:46

LONDON: A former dual national prisoner jailed by Iran has said that the country's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are "blundering and brainwashed idiots."

British Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert, 35, who was jailed for almost three years on trumped-up charges of spying, told The Telegraph that her captors were incompetent and were "not well versed in security, geopolitics or counter-espionage."

While detained in Evin Prison in Tehran, Moore-Gilbert was accused of operating as a spy in the country before her arrival, thanks to a mistake on the part of the IRGC, who used the wrong calendar in reference to her account.

After her ordeal and release in late 2020, Moore-Gilbert began writing a book, "The Uncaged Sky," which details her treatment in Iran. It was released in April this year.

BACKGROUND

British Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert was arrested in 2018 after leaving a conference but realized that she was being used as a pawn to extract concessions and funding from Western countries.

She said: "They're not necessarily talented or skilled. Some of them are smart but they're brainwashed.

"I watched the movie about Johnny English in Farsi in my cell, and I thought, that is the Revolutionary Guard – the Iranian Johnny English. Most of the time, they are blundering around arresting innocent people because of brainwashing and conspiracy theories."

The IRGC is Iran's elite fighting force and answers directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

But critics argue that in the case of Moore-Gilbert and other dual nationals arrested and jailed by the force – including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe – the IRGC uses hostage-taking as a means to generate funds.

Moore-Gilbert was arrested in 2018 after leaving a conference but realized that she was being used as a pawn to extract concessions and funding from Western countries.

She said: "I had been calling for my case to be made public from the first few months of my arrest. I was telling my family on the phone – go to the media, get it out there, don't keep it a secret. But unfortunately that wasn't listened to.

"I don't blame my family for it at all, the advice they were getting from the government was it's better to keep quiet."

The academic urged families of hostages taken by Iran to go public through

media campaigns. "I don't see any evidence of hostages being treated worse in prison (after going public)," she said. "I noticed that great attention was placed on my medical situation after the arrest became public."

And to make matters worse, the academic discovered that her husband, Ruslan Hodorov, a Russian Israeli dual national, had been having an affair in Australia during her time in jail.

But Moore-Gilbert described the discovery as a "blessing in disguise." The two have since divorced.

She said: "Whilst it doesn't reflect well on his character that he abandoned me in my darkest moment, I'm better off without him."





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[Lebanese government goes into caretaker mode amid calls to expedite economic recovery plan](#)

Sat, 2022-05-21 22:21

BEIRUT: The mandate of the newly elected Lebanese parliament begins on Sunday amid warnings that any delay in the country's economic recovery plan would have a high cost. The term of the previous parliament expired on Saturday.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun said the government of Najib Mikati was considered to have resigned based on the constitution.

Aoun expressed his appreciation to the prime minister and ministers, asking the government to act in caretaker mode until a new government was formed.

The Cabinet held its final session on Friday fraught with last-minute decisions, including the approval of the economic recovery plan, amid objection from the ministers of Hezbollah and the Amal movement.

FASTFACT

The Cabinet held its final session on Friday fraught with last-minute decisions, including the approval of Lebanon's economic recovery plan.

Mikati said: "Deposits of up to \$100,000 will be fully protected," stressing at the same time that there was "no economy without banks."

The financial strategy in the plan includes a program to restore financial solvency "as a priority to enhance confidence in the state."

In the medium and long term, it aims to put the debt on a regressive path through the introduction of gradual financial adjustments accompanied by permanent and strategic debt restructuring reforms.

The government also expects to cancel a large part of the Central Bank's foreign currency obligations to commercial banks.

The Cabinet approved an increase in the telecommunications tariff, starting July, accompanied by the formation of a ministerial committee to review the remarks from the communications minister's plan.

It did not approve the item related to the customs dollar after the finance minister withdrew it from the agenda "to avoid public anger."

The Cabinet approved allocating \$35 million for chronic diseases and cancer drugs, provided that the amount was secured by the Housing Bank in US dollars, which would be enough for four months.

Mikati warned: "Any delay in the recovery plan will have a high cost. Had we resolved this two years ago, the cost would have been much lower."

He stressed that rescue opportunities were only available through the International Monetary Fund, and the Central Bank should set the necessary standards to ensure the growth of the economy.

He criticized the attempts of some to prioritize their interest over the public interest, indirectly finding fault in how the Free Patriotic Movement had handled the electricity crisis.

"I personally received two offers from companies willing to operate the Al-Zahrani and Deir Ammar plants to produce electricity on gas at excellent prices. A consulting office was assigned to study the two offers, but unfortunately, the minister of energy withdrew this item from the Cabinet's agenda to be further discussed."

MP Ashraf Rifi, commenting on the electricity issue, said on Saturday: "What

Mikati said about withdrawing these offers from the Cabinet's agenda constitutes a continuation of a major crime committed against the Lebanese immersed in darkness. Hezbollah-backed Gebran Bassil is the one to blame."

Bassil, he added, had taken over the Ministry of Energy since 2008 "as if it were his personal property, with all the failures, waste, and corruption practiced within it, and the Lebanese are paying the price."

Rifi called on sovereign and reformist MPs to make the electricity issue their priority, agree on a plan of action, and hold those involved accountable.

The International Support Group for Lebanon has called on adopting the necessary legislation to secure economic stability in Lebanon, strengthen governance, and implement the reforms that Lebanon and its people urgently need to bring the country back up on its feet.

The ISG also called on all concerned parties to move quickly to form a government that can implement the vital reforms that are long overdue and to continue working with the IMF, including implementing the prior measures that Lebanon committed to in the staff-level agreement on April 7 to lay solid foundations for the sustainable social and economic recovery of Lebanon.

The US State Department urged the elected MPs and political leaders to respond to the Lebanese people's call for change and to work seriously and urgently to take the necessary measures to save the economy.

It called for the rapid formation of a government that was capable and committed to carrying out the serious work required to restore the confidence of the Lebanese people and the international community.

The elected parliament is meanwhile preparing to elect a speaker and deputy speaker.

The Development and Liberation bloc announced Najib Berri's nomination for the parliament speaker position at the end of a meeting headed by him. He has headed parliament since 1992 and nobody is running against him.

If Berri is elected by acclamation, this will be his seventh term.

The bloc stressed the need for the caretaker government to carry out its duties in the transitional period and follow up on issues that concerned people and their economic and social problems, especially controlling the exchange rate and securing fuel, bread, and other needs.

The FPM, the Lebanese Forces Party, and independent and reformist MPs are against Berri's nomination.

Member of the Development and Liberation bloc, Dr. Michel Moussa, told Arab News: "In this defining stage, parliamentary blocs communicate with one another to voice their positions on Berri's candidacy, while it is only natural for him to be running."

He explained that the blocs would hold their meetings next week. "But in Lebanon, everything is decided at the last minute."

As of Sunday evening, the elected MPs will have 15 days to elect the speaker, said Moussa.

Otherwise, the process of assigning a new prime minister to form the next government would be disrupted, provided the caretaker government continued to function until a decree to form the new government was issued.

"All these things will become clear next week."



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[Pressure mounts on Houthis to lift](#)

Taiz siege

Author:

Sat, 2022-05-21 21:49

AL-MUKALLA: Iran-backed Houthis have named their representatives on a joint committee that will work to reopen roads in Taiz and other provinces, raising hopes of an end to the militants' siege of the strategic city, a Yemeni government official said.

After weeks of delays, the Houthis sent a list of candidates for the committee to the office of the UN Yemen envoy, according to deputy head of the Yemeni government delegation on Taiz, Maj. Mohammed Abdullah Al-Mahmoudi.

The move comes as the militia faces growing pressure at home and abroad to end its eight-year siege of Yemen's third-largest city.

Under the UN-brokered truce that came into effect on April 2, warring factions were expected to stop hostilities on all fronts, allow commercial flights to operate out of Sanaa airport, permit fuel ships to enter Hodeidah seaport, and nominate candidates for a joint committee to discuss the reopening of roads in Taiz and other provinces.

On April 7, the Yemeni government sent a list of four participants for the meeting, according to the UN Yemen's office, almost three days after UN envoys asked both sides to nominate their negotiators.

The Houthis have been accused of failing to take the lifting of the blockade seriously, as they delayed naming representatives and kept up attacks on residents in the city.

Al-Mahmoudi told Arab News on Saturday that the Houthi delegation includes Yahya Al-Razami, Hussein Dhaif, Mohammed Al-Mahtouri and Shukari Mahyoub.

"They are intelligence officers," he said, adding that the committee might meet in the Jordanian capital Amman or elsewhere this week.

Al-Mahmoudi is joined on the government team by Abdul Kareem Shaiban, Abdul Aziz Al-Majeedi and Ali Al-Ajaar.

"We have been told to get ready for the meeting," he said.

Pressure has increased on the Houthis to lift the siege of Taiz as the Yemeni government puts into place its commitments under the truce, including allowing about 12 fuel ships to enter Hodeidah seaport, facilitating the departure of two commercial flights from Sanaa airport, and naming its representatives in talks over the future of the city.

In a rare challenge to the militants, hundreds of people gathered for Friday prayers near a closed road on the eastern outskirts of the besieged city, despite the risk of coming under fire from Houthi snipers.

After the prayers, people raised posters and chanted slogans that called for roads to be reopened and an end to the siege.

Abdul Jabar Noman, an activist, told Arab News that many people had died on rugged and dangerous roads while seeking to avoid Houthi checkpoints around the city.

Daily protests are aimed at highlighting residents' suffering under the blockade, he said.

"Lifting the siege will help people to move between cities easily, bring down prices of basic commodities, and fuel will be sold at the official price," he said.

Abroad, Saudi, Yemeni and Western diplomats and officials are also increasing pressure on the Houthis to lift the blockade and join efforts to end the war.

Prince Khalid bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's deputy minister of defense, demanded the world, mainly the UN, order the Houthis to lift the siege, deposit revenues from Hodeidah port into the central bank, and comply with peace initiatives.

After meeting Timothy Lenderking, US special envoy for Yemen, in Washington, Prince Khalid tweeted: "Although the momentum of the truce remains high, I reaffirmed the need for the United Nations and the international community to pressure the Houthis into reopening the roads of Taiz, deposit revenues of the Hodeidah port, and engage with peace proposals."

Ahmed Awadh bin Mubarak, Yemen's foreign minister, met with Brett McGurk, the White House coordinator of the Middle East and North Africa, in Washington, where he called for global pressure on the Houthis to respect the truce and reopen roads in Taiz.

"I stressed our appreciation for the US and the need to pressure the #Houthis to adhere to the #truce and end #Taiz siege," the Yemeni minister tweeted.

The Yemeni Embassy in Washington accused the Houthis of using the blockade as a pressure tactic, adding that the siege has isolated thousands of Taiz residents from the rest of Yemen.

"Every day, hundreds of thousands of people in the third-largest city in Yemen – #Taiz – feel like they are boxed in a besieged city since 2015. A city that is cut off from the rest of Yemen by the #Houthis only to be used as a political bargaining chip," the embassy tweeted.



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[Turkey tightens foreign citizenship investment from June](#)

Sat, 2022-05-21 21:36

ANKARA: A price hike for foreigners seeking citizenship through real estate investment is the latest attempt by the Turkish government to ease the country's financial woes.

The move is estimated to help Turkey overcome its current account deficit and change the profile of foreign investors.

"Only up to June 3 you can apply for Turkish citizenship by investing \$250,000. Obtain a Turkish passport and citizenship in the most prestigious projects in Istanbul," a popular advertisement reads.

Amid widespread criticism of skyrocketing house prices in the country, which has hit Turkish nationals the most, the government recently raised the amount that foreigners must invest in property in order to become eligible for citizenship.

BACKGROUND

Amid widespread criticism of skyrocketing house prices in the country, which has hit Turkish nationals the most, the government recently raised the amount that foreigners must invest in property in order to become eligible for citizenship.

Accordingly, any foreign national who buys real estate worth at least \$400,000 – raised from \$250,000 in the previous legislation – can get Turkish citizenship. The money should be deposited to a Turkish bank, and the house should not be sold for three years.

Foreign nationals who fulfill this condition, as well as their spouses and children below 18, automatically receive Turkish passports.

The purchase of housing by foreigners is expected to ease Turkey's widening current account deficit and support the real estate sector, as well as construction companies.

Turkey's budget deficit tripled in April compared with the previous year and the fiscal gap reached 50.2 billion liras (\$3.23 billion). The country also posted a current account deficit of \$5.5 billion.

Foreign nationals who join the private pension system with at least \$500,000 or foreign equivalent and stay within the system for three years are also entitled to obtain Turkish citizenship.

Foreign businessmen who provide employment opportunities for 50 people in Turkey or those depositing \$500,000 to Turkish banks without withdrawing it for three years can also get Turkish citizenship, according to the amended law.

The legislative change will apply from June 13.

For the moment, Russians, Ukrainians and Gulf nationals are the top clients in the Turkish real estate sector, and are buying up property in southern resort towns and Istanbul.

Russians also established a record number of companies – 64 – in March, quadrupling the figure from the previous month.

The number of houses sold in Turkey to foreign buyers soared 58 percent annually, according to official data. Russians topped the foreign buyers' list with 1,152 houses. They were followed by Iranians and Iraqis, who bought 905 and 714 houses, respectively.

To facilitate sales, Turkish banks also began opening ruble-based accounts.

From January to April, residential property sales to foreigners increased by 49 percent, reaching 20,791 units.

“As the amount of investments required for citizenship was reduced from \$1 million to \$250,000 over the last four years, there is an increased demand for acquiring Turkish citizenship. But increasing it to \$400,000 will also improve the foreign investors’ profile in Turkey,” said Selen Kolan-Imir, an attorney specializing in citizenship law.

However, experts note that the growing interest in the Turkish real estate market by foreigners risks increasing housing prices to uncontrollable levels.

The depreciation in the Turkish lira has also made Turkey’s real estate market more appealing to foreign investors.

“Rather than asking people to invest in real estate, there is a need to encourage foreigners to generate employment opportunities or open innovative startups to result in long-term advantages for the Turkish economy,” Kolan-Imir told Arab News.

With the increased number of foreign children as a result of Turkish citizenship investments, the country should also provide new educational and social facilities, she added.

“Recently there is a surge of private international schools that are opened for foreign children who are living in Turkey with their families or for those who become a new Turkish citizen.”

Bulut Bagci, president of the World Tourism Forum Institute, said that offering citizenship through investment is common in Europe, and that Turkey is choosing to follow a similar path.

“Compared to the similar cases in Europe, especially in the UK, this amount is still low. However, it will support tourism in Turkey and increase tourism revenues, because people who buy a house will visit the country frequently and go to the touristic destinations,” he told Arab News.

However, last month, some opposition lawmakers submitted a motion to parliament for a temporary ban on property sales to foreigners.

Bagci added that foreign nationals who receive Turkish citizenship should be encouraged to take part in the tourism sector by buying hotels and other facilities.

“Following prolonged conflicts in its neighborhood, Turkey needs tourism revenues to meet its foreign exchange needs. My only concern is that the purchase of houses should not be made open to abuse as it needs to be monitored closely with a strict regulation. I have heard so many cases where people sell their houses after getting citizenship to take benefits from this sector,” he said.

After the government recently revealed a new package to provide cheaper housing loans, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that property prices in Turkey should be tightly monitored.



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[Tunisia heads for 'new republic' in dialogue without political parties](#)

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Fri, 2022-05-20 23:20

TUNIS: Tunisia's President Kais Saied on Friday appointed a loyalist law professor to head a committee charged with writing a constitution for a "new republic", through a national dialogue that excludes political parties. On July 25 last year, Saied sacked the government and suspended parliament, sidelining the political parties that have dominated Tunisian politics since

the 2011 revolution that sparked the Arab Spring uprisings. He has since vowed to scrap the country's 2014 constitution and draft a replacement to be put to referendum in July, but has repeatedly inveighed against political parties despite calls for an inclusive dialogue. On Friday the official gazette announced that law professor Sadeq Belaid would head the newly created "National Consultative Commission for a New Republic", charged with drawing up a draft constitution. Saied has also created three other committees to focus on socio-economic issues, the judiciary and on national dialogue. While major organisations including the powerful UGTT trade union confederation are supposed to be involved, no political party is set to take part. Saied announced in early May the establishment of a long-awaited "national dialogue" – at the same time attacking the political parties he accuses of having plundered the country. Since his July power grab, many Tunisians have supported his moves against a political class seen as corrupt, but opponents have labelled his moves a coup and he has faced calls from home and abroad for a dialogue involving all of the country's major actors.



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