

# Tunisian political crisis deepens

Author:

Tue, 2022-01-04 23:36

TUNIS: Detained Tunisian ex-justice minister Nouredine Bhiri of the Islamist-inspired Ennahda party, who is refusing food or medication after his transfer to hospital, is suspected of “terrorism,” the interior minister said Monday.

Bhiri, deputy president of Ennahda – viewed by President Kais Saied as an enemy – was arrested by plainclothes officers on Friday and his whereabouts were initially unknown.

Ennahda had played a central role in Tunisian politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied last year. Tunisia was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolts of a decade ago, but civil society groups and Saied’s opponents have expressed fear of a slide back to authoritarianism a decade after the revolution that toppled longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

“There were fears of acts of terrorism targeting the country’s security and we had to act,” Interior Minister Taoufik Charfeddine said late Monday of the arrest.

A member of a delegation that visited Bhiri in hospital said on Monday that he was refusing food or medication.

On Sunday activists and a former Ennahda legislator said Bhiri was in a critical condition and facing death.

But the source told AFP that Bhiri, 63, is “not in critical condition for the time being.”

The source, asking not to be named, said that a joint team from Tunisia’s independent anti-torture group INPT and the United Nations rights commission visited Bhiri at hospital in the northern town of Bizerte on Sunday. He is “lively and lucid,” and being kept under close observation in a private room of the hospital’s cardiology ward.

Since Friday, however, Bhiri has “refused to take any food or medication, prompting his transfer to hospital” two days later, the source said.

Samir Dilou, a lawyer and ex-Ennahda MP, condemned Bhiri’s arrest as “political” and an abuse of the justice system. He told a Tunis news conference that he is lodging a “kidnapping” charge against Saied and Interior Minister Charfeddine.

The interior minister said late Monday that evidence had been sent to the Justice Ministry regarding Bhiri’s activities, but that the prosecution “delayed” action on the matter.

This, Charfeddine said, prompted him to “quickly apply ... judicial control”

over Bhiri, in a context where he was suspected of “falsifying” identity papers, including for a Syrian woman.

The minister said he had “personally verified” that the detainee was being “treated well.”

Bhiri’s wife, Saida Akremi, also a lawyer, told reporters he had suffered “a heart attack,” and that she was being denied access to him because she refused to sign documents as demanded by security services.

Mondher Ounissi, a doctor and member of Ennahdha’s executive bureau, said on Sunday that Bhiri suffers from several chronic illnesses, including diabetes and hypertension.

He has been “deprived of his medication” and “his life is threatened,” Ounissi said, adding that Bhiri usually takes 16 pills a day.

The Interior Ministry on Friday said that two individuals had been ordered under house arrest, without identifying them.

It said the move was a “preventive measure dictated by the need to preserve national security.”

The anti-torture group INPT has identified the second person detained as Fathi Baldi, a former interior ministry official.

The president “bears full responsibility for the life of Mr. Bhiri,” the anti-Saied group “Citizens against the coup” said Sunday on Twitter.



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## [Israel to start reopening to foreigners even as omicron surges](#)

Author:

Tue, 2022-01-04 22:56

JERUSALEM: Israel said it will admit foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity from countries deemed medium-risk next week, partially reversing a ban imposed in late November in response to the fast-spreading omicron variant.

The change suggests Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government sees waning value in sweeping travel curbs – which wrecked winter tourism – as domestic coronavirus cases surge.

The Health Ministry said that, as of Jan. 9, foreign travelers from 199 “orange” countries will be admitted if they can prove they are vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19.

Orange-listed countries include Australia, Italy and Ireland. The ministry recommended that South Africa, Nigeria, Spain, Portugal, France and Canada, among 16 countries listed as “red” or high COVID-19 risk, be changed to “orange.”

The announcement came even as Bennett predicted that new cases could increase tenfold within days. The rapid pace of infection has led to many Israelis waiting hours in lines for COVID-19 tests, although omicron has not brought corresponding rises in mortality.

Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz said Israel would adjust its criteria for compulsory testing and focus primarily on people at high risk. Subsequently, more Israelis “will be required to exercise personal responsibility and perform tests at home,” he said in televised remarks.

The government's strategy is focused on vaccinations, with a fourth dose – or second booster – offered to vulnerable cohorts. Within a day of making it available, 100,000 people received or made an appointment to get the second booster.

“I closed the skies five weeks ago when everything was good,” Bennett said in a televised address on Sunday, referring to Israel’s Nov. 25 ban on most travel to and from red-listed countries after omicron was first detected abroad.

“And, over the coming week, it would be reasonable for us to reopen anew.”

The US, Britain, the UAE, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey remain on Israel’s red list, the Health Ministry said. Visitors from those countries require advance special permission from an Israeli committee to enter.

Israel has also scaled down precautionary self-isolation periods for people who have been exposed to COVID-19 carriers, concerned that mass quarantining could paralyze the economy.



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Israel begins fourth COVID-19 jab for over 60s, health workers  
Israel to admit some foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity as of Jan. 9

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# US hopes to build on Iran nuclear talk progress this week

Tue, 2022-01-04 23:25

WASHINGTON: Nuclear deal talks with Iran in Vienna have shown modest progress and the United States hopes to build on that this week, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday amid efforts to revive a 2015 agreement. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) lifted sanctions against Tehran in exchange for restrictions on its atomic activities but Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the deal in 2018, a year after he took office. Iran later breached many of the deal's nuclear restrictions and kept pushing well beyond them. Tehran says it has never pursued the development of nuclear weapons.

In the latest round of indirect talks between Iran and the United States in Vienna, Tehran is focused on getting US sanctions lifted again.

"There was some modest progress in the talks last week. We hope to build on that this week," Price told reporters.

"Sanctions relief and the steps that the United States would take... when it comes to sanctions together with the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take if we were to achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA – that's really at the heart of the negotiations that are ongoing in Vienna right now."

Meanwhile, Iran said it has detected a new "realism" on the part of Western countries, as further meetings in Vienna aimed at rescuing the accord got underway.

The talks resumed in late November and the latest round was set to formally get underway on Monday after a three-day break for the end of year holidays.

Tehran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri met with EU coordinator Enrique Mora, Iran's state news agency IRNA reported.

Bagheri held a separate meeting with top negotiators from the European parties to the deal, the agency added.

Monday's meetings were "informal," Russia's envoy in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said on Twitter.

The meetings came hours after Tehran detected what it called a sense of "realism" from Western parties.

"We sense a retreat, or rather realism from the Western parties in the Vienna negotiations, that there can be no demands beyond the nuclear accord," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told reporters.

However, "it is too early to judge if the United States and the three European countries have drawn up a real agenda to commit to lifting sanctions," he said.



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## [US, EU warn Sudan's military against unilaterally appointing a government](#)

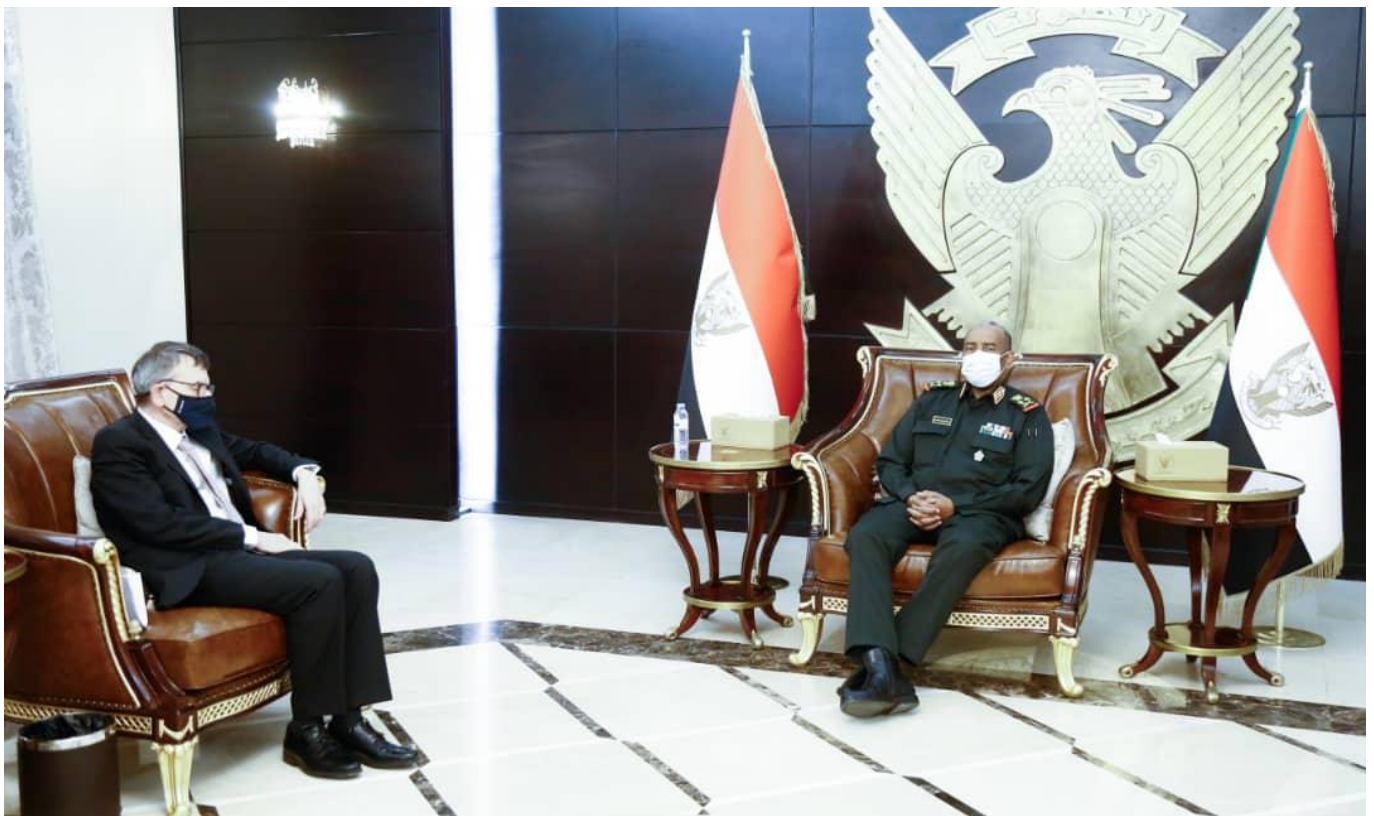
Tue, 2022-01-04 22:25

WASHINGTON/LONDON: The United States and European Union warned Sudan's military on Tuesday against naming its own prime minister after civilian leader Abdalla Hamdok quit amid protests against the junta. The so-called troika on Sudan – the US, Britain and Norway – and the EU “will not support a prime minister or government appointed without the involvement of a broad range of civilian stakeholders,” a joint statement said. “Unilateral action to appoint a new prime minister and cabinet would undermine those institutions' credibility and risks plunging the nation into conflict,” the statement added. Hamdok was ousted in the coup, only to be reinstated a month later following a deal with the military meant to calm tensions and anti-coup protests.

Hamdok stepped down Sunday amid political deadlock, saying he had failed to find a compromise between the ruling generals and the pro-democracy movement. Meanwhile, Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, chairman of the Sovereign Council, held talks with Volker Perthes, UN envoy to Sudan and head of the UN Integrated Transition Support Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), to discuss the current political situation in the country after Hamdok's resignation, state news agency SUNA reported.

Al-Burhan briefed Perthes on developments in the transition process and the two sides stressed the need to complete the structures of the transitional period and expedite the appointment of a new prime minister to succeed Hamdok.

*(With AFP, Reuters and AP)*





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## [Moroccan tour operators protest pandemic restrictions](#)

Author:

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RABAT: Moroccan tour operators threatened with bankruptcy due to border closures protested Tuesday, calling for the tourism industry to be “saved” as the coronavirus wreaks havoc on international travel.

About 200 industry workers demonstrated in front of the tourism ministry in Rabat, demanding the reopening of borders and talks with the authorities, citing the “dramatic collapse” of the industry in the wake of the pandemic. “Have mercy on the economy and the people,” one sign read.

Morocco suspended all passenger flights from November 29 until January 31 as a result of rising infections of the omicron variant worldwide.

The restrictions have dealt a punishing blow to the North African country’s vital tourism sector, already on its knees after two lost seasons because of the pandemic.

Lahcen Zemat, head of the national federation of the hotel industry, said the situation for tourism was “catastrophic” and called for borders to be reopened and bank loan payments to be delayed.

Raja Ould Hamada, the owner of a travel agency in Marrakesh, said the most recent border closure was a “fatal blow” to the industry, claiming “other competing countries” such as Egypt, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates had benefitted.

Rabat recently promised a 2,000-dirham (about \$216) monthly allowance to tourism workers for the final quarter of 2021.



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