

# Iraqi police commander sacked after deadly raid

Sat, 2022-01-01 01:10

BAGHDAD: Iraq's interior minister dismissed the police chief of Babylon province on Friday and several officers were called for questioning following an operation that reportedly led to the deaths of 20 members of the same family.

The operation, details of which remain unclear, took place Thursday when rapid intervention units and intelligence forces sought to storm a house in the village of Al-Rashayed in the central Iraqi province.

In a brief initial statement, security forces said they had "pursued two individuals accused of terrorism" who "opened fire indiscriminately" once surrounded.

An investigation was opened "after the discovery of a number of dead bodies of citizens in a house," the statement added.

On Friday, Interior Minister Othman Al-Ghanemi traveled to Al-Rashayed where he sacked the police chief and announced the formation of a commission to investigate "the unit that carried out the operation."

The official Iraqi News Agency gave a death toll of 20 civilians from the same family, and said that the owner of the property had opened fire and "refused to surrender."

A separate statement from the security forces said a "number of officers and individuals" had been called in for questioning in connection with the incident, without providing details on their identities.

Interior ministry official Saad Maan posted a video of the premises on Twitter, showing a house with a blackened facade and gutted doors and windows.

He denounced a "crime on all levels," without identifying those to blame, and said the investigation was ongoing to "understand all the circumstances of the incident."

On Thursday evening, security sources and media outlets had suggested a suspect linked with the Daesh group or drug trafficking rings had been involved.



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## [Senior Ennahdha party official held in Tunisia: lawyer](#)

Author:

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Fri, 2021-12-31 00:16

TUNIS: Plainclothes officers in Tunisia's capital on Friday arrested a senior official of the Ennahdha party which played a central role in the country's politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied.

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.

Ennahdha condemned the arrest of Nouredine Bhiri, a former justice minister and deputy president of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha, as a "dangerous precedent".

"Plainclothes agents in two cars arrested Nouredine Bhiri when he was leaving home with his wife," Samir Dilou, a lawyer and former legislator, told AFP.

No official was available to explain the reason for Bhiri's arrest. But in a statement issued late Friday, the interior ministry said it had ordered two people, whom it did not identify, to be placed under house arrest.

This "preventive measure was dictated by the need to safeguard national security," it said, without elaborating.

Saied on July 25 sacked the Ennahdha-supported government and suspended parliament, presenting himself as the ultimate interpreter of the constitution.

He later took steps to rule by decree, and in early December vowed to press on with reforms to the political system.

The former law professor announced an 11-week "popular consultation" to produce "draft constitutional and other reforms" ahead of a referendum set for July 25.

His opponents have denounced a "coup" and warned against what they see as Saied's wish to settle scores with those he has called "enemies" but never names.

A Tunisian court last week sentenced in absentia exiled former president Moncef Marzouki, a fierce critic of Saied, to four years in prison.

Bhiri was "arrested brutally and taken to an unknown destination", Dilou said.

Agents also seized the mobile phone of Bhiri's wife Saida Akremi, who is a lawyer, he added.

In a statement, Ennahdha said that Bhiri was being questioned by authorities and denounced "a kidnapping and dangerous precedent marking the country's entry into a tunnel to dictatorship."

Party official Mohamed Goumani told a press conference that Saied and the interior minister "bear responsibility" and decried the "intimidation" of those opposed to the president's moves.

Ennahdha was the largest party in the parliament suspended by Saied.

But political rivalries had blocked ministerial appointments and diverted resources from tackling Tunisia's mounting economic and social problems, leading many in the country to initially welcome the president's power grab. Without commenting on Bhiri's arrest, the presidency on Friday announced a New Year's amnesty for 1,300 prisoners.



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## [Lebanese bid farewell to 2021 amid health and security alerts](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-12-31 21:17

BEIRUT: The Lebanese bid farewell to 2021 amid health and security alerts, cautiously awaiting what 2022 holds.

Security services and civil defense members were deployed throughout the country on New Year's Eve, setting up 60 checkpoints along the Lebanese coast from Anfeh to Naqoura, and in mountainous areas known to host parties this

time of year.

An awareness hashtag #DontLetLaughterTurnToTears was launched for citizens, warning them to drive with caution so that the joy of the coming New Year does not turn into a tragedy.

The Ministry of Tourism demanded that restaurants, nightclubs and hotels deny entry to those without a vaccination certificate or a negative PCR test in the past 48 hours, all while abiding by current COVID-19 preventive measures.

Many rushed to bakeries, supermarkets and catering services on the last day of 2021, as the majority of citizens are spending the night at home or in chalets, while the well-off and expatriates who returned home for the holidays are celebrating at hotels and nightclubs.

Almost all television stations broadcast entertainment programs on Friday, giving out various gifts to callers, such as cheese wheels, dinner vouchers and a few dollars, which are now worth a fortune amid the financial crisis Lebanon is experiencing.

Although most Lebanese artists are singing at parties abroad this New Year's Eve, the cost of attending a party during which several artists are singing ranges between \$100 and \$750, provided that only 30 percent of the venue's capacity is filled, per the Ministry of Health's guidelines.

Meanwhile, the committee that follows up on COVID-19 preventive measures had imposed a curfew on unvaccinated persons, but this measure has not been not taken seriously by all.

Ahead of New Year's Eve, the Ministry of Health confirmed 4,537 new COVID-19 cases and 15 deaths.

As Lebanon escaped a lockdown over the holidays, Minister of Health Dr. Firass Abiad fears a health disaster that would force the concerned authorities to impose a full lockdown, which may harm the academic year that is supposed to resume on Jan. 10, 2022.

The Minister of Education and Higher Education Abbas Al-Halabi called on all officials of public and private educational institutions to make sure all employees take two vaccine doses, or face taking a PCR test twice a week at their own expense.

Assem Araji MP, a cardiologist who heads Parliament's health committee, seemed concerned about the increasing omicron cases. "We face an outbreak; an increase in cases is imminent," he said.

He expressed concerns about "the hospitalization rate rising following New Year's Eve parties, especially since we are running low on COVID-19 beds in several hospitals amid the shortages in medical staff and medical supplies. We will thus be facing a painful health reality."

Araji called on the public to "abide by preventive measures, or we will pay."



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## [Will Turkey continue its policy of reconciliation in the region next year?](#)

Fri, 2021-12-31 19:10

ANKARA: Turkey made significant efforts in 2021 to normalize its relations with Armenia, Egypt, the Gulf, and Israel after years of disagreements.

The big question now is whether Ankara's efforts to thaw the ice with these countries by de-escalating regional conflicts will continue with the same vigor in 2022.

On Thursday, Armenia announced its embargo on goods from Turkey would be lifted on January 1 and that Yerevan-Istanbul charter flights would soon begin again after decades of closed borders.

Two weeks ago, Turkey appointed its former ambassador to the US Serdar Kilic as its special envoy to conduct normalization talks with Armenia. This gesture was followed by Armenia appointing Ruben Rubinyan – who studied in Turkey through a scholarship from a Turkish NGO – as its special representative for dialogue. Moscow will host the first meeting between the two envoys in January.

“Turkey has been recalibrating its foreign policy in the eastern Mediterranean and the MENA region,” Prof. Michaël Tanchum, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington and an associate senior policy fellow in the Africa program at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told Arab News. According to Tanchum, Turkey’s focus in the Eastern Mediterranean has been on Egypt and to a lesser extent Israel.

Regarding Egypt, Turkey this year asked all Istanbul-based Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media channels to soften their criticism of the Egyptian government. The two countries held talks in September, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently announced that Ankara was considering sending ambassadors back to Egypt and Israel.

During his recent meeting with representatives from the Jewish diaspora, Erdogan underlined that Turkey-Israel ties are vital for the stability and security of the region.

“Both (Egypt and Israel) have become key energy, economic, and military partners to Greece and Cyprus following the deterioration in their respective relations with Turkey in the early part of the previous decade,” Tanchum said. “Similarly, Ankara has been taken aback by Greece’s developing defense ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel under the Abraham Accords has solidified this alignment of Middle Eastern states with Greece and Cyprus.”

Tanchum thinks that, for Egypt, the most immediate stumbling block – despite Ankara’s diplomatic outreach – is Turkey’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

“Beyond this, the two countries are increasingly rivals for influence across Africa. The fact that Egypt was not invited to Turkey’s recent Africa summit shows the geopolitical limitations. Nonetheless, commercial relations between the two nations will likely increase, barring any major incident. The same is true for Israel-Turkey relations,” he said.

Although Turkey and several regional actors backed different sides in the Libyan conflict, Ankara now supports Libya’s political transition towards elections.

Turkish Airlines is also expected to relaunch its flights to Benghazi once technical work and security precautions have been completed.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu recently noted that Turkey does not differentiate between the west and east of Libya, and that Ankara was prepared to meet with both military strongman Gen. Khalifa Haftar and the

speaker of the Tobruk-based parliament, Aquila Saleh.

Turkey's moves towards reconciliation with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel as part of its efforts to break its regional isolation have escalated in recent months.

The UAE committed to investing \$10 billion in Turkey following the visit of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to Ankara on November 24 – offering a vital boost for the Turkish economy. The Turkish Central Bank is expected to sign deals with its counterpart in the UAE soon and Erdogan is reportedly scheduled to visit the UAE in February.

“The rapprochement between Turkey and the UAE will likely continue, with expanding Emirati investment in Turkish companies. The Emirati fintech company Tpay's acquisition of Turkey's mobile banking and digital financial services firm Payguru is just one example of more investments likely to occur in 2022,” Tanchum said.

Meanwhile, Erdogan announced that Turkey will work to improve its ties with Saudi Arabia. The two countries' foreign ministers met in May and committed to holding regular consultations. Experts anticipate further such commitments between Riyadh and Ankara in the new year.

Of all its relationships that Turkey sought to improve in 2021, Tanchum sees Armenia as the wild card.

“Because of the outcome of the Karabakh war, there is a genuine moment of opportunity for Turkish-Armenian reconciliation,” he said. “A grand diplomatic gesture on Turkey's part that closes a chapter on an old historical wound could reset the tone of Turkish foreign policy with positive spillover effects for Turkey's relations with its Eastern Mediterranean neighbors as well as with the European Union.”

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish program at the Washington Institute, agrees that 2021 has been a year of significant shifts in Turkey's foreign policy.

“By re-establishing friendships and forging new partnerships, Ankara has shown that it realizes it cannot stand alone and ignore everybody else in regional and global politics. Therefore, it chose to reset its ties with former rivals,” he told Arab News.

Cagaptay expects Turkey's next target for normalization of relations will be the US, but considering Ankara's current power-sharing agreements with Russia in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus, that process could be trickier and take longer.

“Therefore, I think it's not a complete pivot (in foreign policy), but the Middle East part of it is an attempt, at least,” he said.

Regarding Turkey's relations with Egypt, Cagaptay notes that it took Turkey nearly eight years to recognize that its singular support of the Muslim Brotherhood failed to pay off.

“No one could have anticipated the speed of the Brotherhood’s fall from power. So I don’t blame Erdogan for that, but he should have been in touch with other political actors and I think that’s where the policy is ill-conceived,” he said. “There is now recognition of this, and 2022 is a pivotal year.”



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**[France says Iran’s space launch hits nuclear talks as they were showing progress](#)**

Fri, 2021-12-31 17:11

PARIS: France on Friday condemned Iran's satellite rocket launch and said it was "all the more regrettable" as nuclear talks with world powers were making progress, echoing concerns expressed by the United States and Germany.

Iran said on Thursday it had used a satellite launch rocket to send three research devices into space, as indirect US-Iran talks take place in Austria to try to salvage a 2015 nuclear deal.

The satellite launch was in breach of UN Security Council resolutions, France's foreign ministry said.

"These activities are all the more regrettable as they come at a time when we are making progress in the nuclear negotiations in Vienna," the French foreign ministry said.

"We call on Iran not to launch further ballistic missiles designed to be capable of carrying nuclear weapons, including space launchers."

Iranian state TV showed footage on Thursday of what it said was the firing of the launch vehicle from the Imam Khomeini Space Center in northern Iran at dawn.

The US State Department said on Thursday Washington was aware of reports on the launch, adding such launches defy a UN Security Council resolution enshrining the 2015 nuclear deal.

A German diplomat said such launches could be used to test technology for ballistic missiles which in principle could be used to deliver nuclear weapons.

Tehran denies its space launch activity is a cover for ballistic missile development.

The 2015 deal extended the time Iran would need to obtain enough fissile material for a nuclear bomb – if it chose to – to at least a year from about two to three months, in return for a lifting of sanctions.

The latest indirect talks between Iran and the US on the 2015 deal resumed on Monday. On Tuesday, Washington expressed caution over upbeat comments by Iran and Russia about the talks, saying it was too soon to say if Tehran had returned to the negotiations with a constructive approach.



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