

## Key players and their backers urged to unblock political stalemate

## UN chief warns foreign interference in Libya 'unprecedented'

UNITED NATIONS, July 9, (AP): UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that foreign interference in Libya's war has reached "unprecedented levels" and urged key players and their backers to unblock the political stalemate and agree to a cease-fire and peace talks.

Calling the current situation "gloomy," the UN chief said Wednesday that the United Nations political mission in Libya is undertaking de-escalation efforts, "including the creation of a possible demilitarized zone," to try to reach a negotiated solution and spare lives. He said between April 1 and June 30 there were at least 102 civilian deaths and 254 civilians wounded in Libya, "a 172% increase compared to the first quarter of 2020."

Guterres addressed a high-level meeting of the UN Security Council six months after leaders of 11 world powers and other countries with in-

terests in Libya's long-running civil war agreed at a conference in Berlin to respect a much-violated UN arms embargo, hold off on military support to the warring parties, and push them to reach a full cease-fire.

Guterres and speaker after speaker decried the failure of the parties to adhere to the Berlin agreement and demand its speedy implementation.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, South Africa's Minister for International Relations Naledi Pandor and Egypt's foreign minister were among those urging a cease-fire.

"We all took strong commitments in the Berlin conference in January and it's now time to translate our words into concrete actions," European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told the virtual meeting. "The polarization that has turned Libya into a theater for proxy-war needs to stop. Action in support of one or the other Libyan parties needs

to stop."

Libya has been in turmoil since 2011, when a civil war toppled long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who was later killed. The country has since split between rival administrations in the east and the west, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

Eastern forces under Khalifa Hifter launched an offensive trying to take Tripoli in April 2019, and the crisis in the oil-rich country has steadily worsened as foreign backers increasingly intervened despite pledges at the Berlin conference.

Hifter's offensive is supported by France, Russia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and other key Arab countries. The government in Tripoli is backed by Turkey — which sent troops and mercenaries to protect the capital in January — as well as Italy and Qatar.

Tripoli-based forces with Turk-

ish support gained the upper hand in the war in early June after retaking the capital's airport, all main entrance and exit points to the city and a string of key towns near Tripoli. They threatened to retake the strategic city of Sirte, which could allow them to gain control of oil fields and facilities in the south that Hifter seized earlier this year as part of his offensive on Tripoli.

Egypt warned that it would intervene militarily if Turkish-backed forces attacked Sirte and the inland Jufra air base.

Guterres told the Security Council that forces supporting the government are now 25 kilometers (15 miles) west of Sirte, after two previous attempts to gain control of the city.

"The situation on the front lines has been mostly quiet since June 10," he said. "However, we are very concerned about the alarming mili-

tary buildup around the city, and the high level of direct foreign interference in the conflict in violation of the UN arms embargo, UN Security Council resolutions, and the commitments made by member states in Berlin."

Turkey's Deputy Foreign Minister Sedat Onal stressed that it was in Libya to support the legitimate government at its request and supported the Berlin agreement for providing "the architecture for intra-Libyan talks."

Referring to Hifter's offensive, Onal said: "Placing the aggressor on equal footing with the legitimate UN-recognized government is wrong and counterproductive. This grave mistake must be corrected." And he said blaming Turkey for what's happening in Libya "amounts to hypocrisy."

Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, whose country currently

holds the council presidency and chaired the meeting, expressed dismay that while other countries were trying to save lives in the COVID-19 pandemic in recent months, hospitals in Libya were being bombed and "ships, planes and trucks with weapons and mercenaries kept arriving in Libyan cities."

He said foreign interference, "the main driver of the conflict in Libya," must be brought to an end, and there must be "no more lies" and "backdoor deals" where foreign parties carve out spheres of influence.

"We will use the measures at our disposal, including targeted sanctions, to make sure that Libya is no longer the battleground in a foreign war," Maas warned.

He urged all parties to unite behind UN-led peace efforts and behind a first important step which could be "a demilitarized solution for Sirte and Jufra."

## In Brief

**RIYADH:** Saudi Arabia reported Monday 42 deaths and 3,036 infections with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

Ministry of health stated that the total number of deaths rose to 2,059. As well as infections went up to 220,144 cases.

Moreover, 3211 people recovered in the last 24 hours to increase the cases to 158,050. (KUNA)

**MUSCAT:** Omani Ministry of Health said on Wednesday 1,210 new coronavirus infection cases were recorded by the local health authorities during past 24 hours, raising total number of contaminations to 50,207.

Up to 939 of the caseload were Omani nationals, whereas 271 cases were of foreigners, Oman News Agency quoted the ministry as saying in a statement.

Moreover, total deaths' number stood at 233 and more than 32,005 patients out of the contaminations' tally recuperated and were pronounced cured of the contagion infection. (KUNA)

**AMMAN:** Jordan, on Wednesday, did not record any COVID-19 infections, to settle at 1,169.

During a joint press conference, the health minister and the cabinet affirmed that the health authorities conducted 6,500 tests during the last 24 hours to reach 441,000 tests.

Up to eight patients recovered from the virus, taking the total recoveries to 977. (KUNA)

**CAIRO:** The Egyptian Health Ministry on Wednesday confirmed 75 fatalities from the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) and 1,025 more cases over the past 24 hours.

The figures brought the country's death toll from the pandemic to 3,564 and the caseload to 78,304, the Ministry's Spokesman Dr. Khaled Mujahed told reporters this evening.

As many as 523 patients have been discharged from hospital, bringing the overall recoveries to 22,241, he added. (KUNA)

**ALGIERS:** The Algerian higher committee on coronavirus announced on Wednesday that four doctors succumbed to complications related to the novel coronavirus (Covid-19).

Prof. Abdulkarim Sahjal, member of the committee, identified the four victims as Dr. Belhamza Mohamad, Dr. Shebilla Samir, Dr. Huho Mohammed and Dr. Murad Rifawi.

The death toll of Algeria's health workers from the pandemic has surged to 30 while cases hit 1,700, he said.

Earlier today, the Algerian health ministry reported 10 fatalities from the pandemic and 469 infections, which took the death toll to 978 and the caseload to 17,348. (KUNA)

**TUNIS:** Tunisia declared on Thursday aborting a "terrorist plot" intended to target the nation vital tourism sector and State sites.

The ministry of interior said in a statement personnel of the unit for probing terrorist crimes carried out a pre-emptive operation following "terrorist schemes set to target the tourism sector and sovereign headquarters."

The plot main matersmind has been apprehended, the ministry statement added.

The detainee confessed, during interrogations, to belonging to "the terrorist Islamic State (Daesh) organization." He told interrogators that he recruited a number of "takfiris as a prelude to carrying out his long term schemes."

The group had monitored potential targets, observing security precautions around the facilities and buildings. (KUNA)

**RIYADH:** Saudi Presidency and the Paris Forum discussed restoring sustainable flows of capital and robust financing for development, during a high-level ministerial virtual meeting on Thursday.

The meeting discussed facing international capital flows volatility, especially due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, according to SPA news agency.

"In response to COVID-19 pandemic, G20 countries have implemented unprecedented fiscal, monetary and financial stability measures and ensured that international financial institutions can provide critical support to developing and low-income countries," said Saudi Minister of Finance Mohammed Al-Jadaan in a speech during the conference. (KUNA)



Hezbollah supporters scuffle with Lebanese army soldiers while protesting the visit by Gen Frank McKenzie, the head of US Central Command, outside the Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut, Lebanon on July 8. (AP)

# Iraq PM's actions could bring escalation: militia

Released early

## Hezb financier returns home

BEIRUT, July 9, (AP): A Lebanese businessman serving a five-year sentence in the United States for providing millions of dollars to the militant Hezbollah group arrived Wednesday in Beirut after his early release, local media reported.

Kassim Tajideen was sentenced last year in a federal court in Washington for his role in a money laundering conspiracy aimed at evading US sanctions. He was arrested in Morocco and extradited to the US in 2017, where he was charged with laundering money for Hezbollah.

A State Department official said the US government had opposed Tajideen's motion for compassionate release but in the end the court ruled in his favor. Tajideen, who was designated as a terrorist in 2009, would remain on a terrorist list and his assets would remain blocked, the official added.

The fact that he is being released early doesn't diminish the severity of his crime, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

There was no immediate comment from Lebanese officials on Tajideen's early release.

Lebanon's National News Agency reported Tajideen's arrival. A local Lebanese TV station, LBC, broadcast a video taken with a mobile phone of his arrival at the Beirut airport. He stepped out of a small jet, wearing a face mask as a necessary coronavirus precaution. The video shows a man rushing toward Tajideen, hugging him and stooping down to Tajideen's feet in celebration of his release.

A federal judge in Washington had ordered Tajideen's release in May. The National, an English language newspaper in the United Arab Emirates, said the 64-year-old Tajideen was granted compassionate release due to health conditions and fears of coronavirus infections in prison. The US Department of Justice had contested the release.

Tajideen was accused of conspiring with at least five other people to conduct over \$50 million in transactions with US businesses in violation of sanctions barring him from doing business with US nationals and companies because of his support for Hezbollah. Washington has designated the Iran-backed Hezbollah a terrorist group.

Tajideen pleaded guilty last December and agreed to forfeit \$50 million.

In March, a Lebanese military tribunal ordered the release of a Lebanese-American held in the country for nearly six months on charges of working for an Israeli-backed militia two decades ago. Amer Fakhoury's release raised speculation that Tajideen may be granted early release in return.

## Baghdad reels from assassination of analyst

**BAGHDAD, July 9, (AP):** A powerful Iran-backed militia said Wednesday there would be "escalation" if Iraq's prime minister continues to clamp down on armed groups, as tensions spiked following the killing of a prominent analyst, pitting the state against rogue elements.

Hostilities have flared as Iraq reels from the assassination of Hisham al-Hashimi, 47, who was gunned down by unknown assailants on motorcycles outside his Baghdad home Monday. He had received death threats from the Islamic State group and Iran-backed militia groups.

Al-Hashimi's killers are still unknown but many point to the timing of the assassination, coming just two weeks after a raid on the headquarters of the Kataib

Hezbollah militia south of Baghdad. They speculate Al-Hashimi may have fallen victim to escalating tensions between the government and militia groups.

Days before his death a study he wrote on the inner workings of Iran-backed militia groups in Iraq was published.

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has vowed to avenge al-Hashimi's killing, but a serious investigation risks further stoking tensions with Iraq's militias.

Katab Hezbollah's spokesman, Mohammed Mohie, speaking to The Associated Press on Wednesday, described the raid on his group's headquarters as an act of "provocation."

Al-Kadhimi has said that bringing armed groups under state control is a goal of his administration.

Iraqi security forces descended on Kataib Hezbollah's headquarters in the Dora neighborhood of Baghdad on June 26 and rounded up 14 men suspected of orchestrating rocket attacks against US forces based at the Baghdad airport, and the US Embassy.

But days later, 13 of them were released after investigators said they could only one of them to the attacks. Rocket attacks then resumed, targeting the heavily fortified Green Zone where the US Embassy is located, and the airport.

"We have our conviction that these provocations (by al-Kadhimi) will not stop, and will continue and there will be an escalation," said Mohie. "That will be in the next stage."

Kataib Hezbollah is part of the Popular Mobilization Forces, the state umbrella group encompassing an array of militias including Iran-backed ones. The US has blamed the group for rocket attacks on its embassy.

Al-Kadhimi came to power with nods from both Iran and the US, and balancing relationships between both rivals was expected to be a chief challenge for his government. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned al-Hashimi's killing and called for Iraq to bring the perpetrators "swiftly to justice," in comments to reporters in Washington.

In response to continued rocket fire, the US Embassy installed a C-RAM system designed to intercept the projectiles. Mohie said the move was "another provocation" that effectively turned the embassy into a "military base."

Meetings were held shortly after the US Embassy began testing the C-RAM system, a senior Shiite political official said, and a decision was made to ramp up pressure on the premier. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

"We have great concern that al-Kadhimi plans to liquidate these (militant) factions," he said.

Hours after the Dora raid, armed men in pickup trucks entered the Green Zone and surrounded an office of the elite Counter-Terrorism Forces, the security force that had carried out the operation.

"It showed the prime minister the limits of his authority and that to deal with this will require a significant amount of effort," said Iraq analyst Sajad Jiyad.

Al-Hashimi, who supported al-Kadhimi and served as an advisor to previous premiers, had written a study looking into the extent of Iranian influence inside the PMF. It was published July 1, days before he was shot dead.

In it, he found that a disproportionate number of Iran-backed factions held leadership and advisory positions within the PMF. Of the 67 Shiite factions within the group, he found that 44 were followers of Iran's Ayatollah Ali Al-Khamenei.

The question now is what can Al-Kadhimi do next.

"It's almost like the militias are saying, if you want an open confrontation bring it on," said Iraq researcher Fanar Haddad. "What is the face-saving alternative? It's not clear."

## Renewed questions about UAE's mass 'surveillance'

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, July 9, (AP): Efforts by the United Arab Emirates to fight the coronavirus have renewed questions about mass surveillance in this US-allied federation of seven sheikhdoms.

Experts believe the UAE is one of the highest per-capita concentrations of surveillance cameras in the world. From the streets of the capital of Abu Dhabi to the tourist attractions of skyscraper-studded Dubai, the cameras keep track of the license plates and faces of those passing by them.

While heralded as a safety measure in a country so far spared from a major militant attack, it also offers its authoritarian government means to track any sign of dissent.

"There is no protection of civil liberties because there are no civil liberties," said Jodi Vittori, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who studies the UAE.

Dubai and Emirati government officials did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The UAE's surveillance state can offer the parlor trick of finding your car at the massive, multistory parking garage of Mall of the Emirates, home to an indoor ski slope. But multiplied across the cameras watching public spaces, buses, the driverless Metro, roadways, gas stations and even all the emirate's more than 10,000 taxi cabs, authorities in effect can track people in real time across Dubai. Police also easily gain access to surveillance footage from state-linked developers and other buildings.

A decade ago, Dubai proved those cameras could be quickly used. After

the Jan. 19, 2010 assassination of Hamas commander Mahmoud al-Mabhouh at a Dubai hotel, police quickly pieced together the some three-dozen suspected Israeli Mossad operatives who carried out the killing. They later showed video beginning from the operators' arrival at the airport to their trailing of al-Mabhouh while dressed as tennis players.

State-linked media at the time suggested some 25,000 cameras watched Dubai. Today, cameras are far more sophisticated and far more prevalent. Technology as well has made the tracking even easier.

Since late 2016, Dubai police have partnered with an affiliate of the Abu Dhabi-based firm DarkMatter to use its Pegasus "big data" application to pool hours of surveillance video to track anyone in the emirate. DarkMatter's hiring of former CIA and National Security Agency analysts has raised concerns, especially as the UAE has harassed and imprisoned human rights activists.

In the run-up to the pandemic, Dubai police launched a new surveillance camera program powered by artificial intelligence called "Oyoon," or "Eyes" in Arabic. Police described the project in January 2018 as a means to "prevent crime, reduce traffic accident related deaths, prevent any negative incidents in residential, commercial and vital areas and to be able to respond immediately to incidents even before they get reported."

The "Oyoon" project included police partnering with government and semi-government businesses that already had a vast network of surveillance cameras.