

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) – Iraqi media outlets on Sunday reported a bomb explosion in the path of Iraqi Army forces left two military forces killed and injured. An Iraqi military force was killed following the explosion of a bomb in Salahuddin province, according to the reports. Another Iraqi military force was injured in the incident. The incident occurred during an inspection operation for reopening the roads in the area. A while ago, the Iraqi Kurdistan region reported that more than 5 million mines and explosives have remained in the area following the wars in recent decades.

To refrain from unlawful and impious source of pleasures is an ornament to the poor and to be thankful for the riches granted is the adornment of wealth.

Amir al-Momeneen Ali (AS)

Zionist Regime Ramps Up Settlement Expansion, Palestinians Boycott Meeting

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – The Zionist regime's radical cabinet on Sunday tabled plans to approve thousands of building permits in the occupied West Bank.

The plans for approval of 4,560 housing units in various areas of the West Bank were included on the agenda of the regime's supreme planning council that meets next week, although only 1,332 are up for final approval, with the remainder still going through the preliminary clearance process.

"We will continue to develop the settlement of and strengthen the Israeli hold on the territory," said finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, who also holds a portfolio at the war ministry that gives him a leading role in the West Bank administration.

Most countries deem the settlements, built on land occupied by the Zionist regime in the 1967 Middle East war, as illegal. Their presence is one of the fundamental issues in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict.



Palestinians seek to establish an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with East Al-Quds as their capital.

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Since entering office in January, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition has approved the promotion of more than 7,000 new housing units, most deep in the

West Bank.

It also amended a law to clear the way for settlers to return to four settlements that had previously been evacuated.

In response to Sunday's decision, the Palestinian Authority - which exercises self-rule in parts of the West Bank - said it would boycott a meeting of the Joint Economic

Committee with the occupying regime scheduled for Monday.

"We decided to boycott the meeting of the Joint Economic Committee between the two parties, which was scheduled to be held tomorrow," Hussein al-Sheikh, Secretary of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)'s Executive Committee, said in a statement on Sunday.

Al-Sheikh said the Palestinian Authority will "study a number of other measures and decisions for implementation related to the relationship with Israel."

The Gaza-based Palestinian resistance movement Hamas condemned the move, saying it "will not give (the occupying regime) legitimacy over our land. Our people will resist it by all means".

In a statement, Hamas warned that the Zionist regime's decision will lead to further escalation in the region.

Estimates indicate that about 700,000 settlers are living in 164 settlements and 116 outposts in the occupied West Bank.

Yemeni Hajj Pilgrims Embark on First Direct Flight to Saudi Arabia Since 2016



Yemeni Muslims wait at Sana'a International Airport to board a flight heading to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on June 17, 2023, to perform the Hajj pilgrimage.

SANA'A (Dispatches) – The first direct flight between Yemen and Saudi Arabia in nearly seven years has taken more than 270 Yemenis from the capital Sana'a to Jeddah, signaling easing tensions between the two countries.

The flight by Yemenia – also known as Yemen Airways – took place Saturday evening and carried Yemeni Muslims embarking on the annual Islamic pilgrimage of Hajj in the Saudi city of Mecca.

The flight is one of five that will carry pilgrims heading to Islam's holiest site from Sana'a's international airport, according to Khalid al-Shayyef, head of the Yemeni airport.

He further explained the flight was the first of five transferring this year's Yemeni pilgrims from Sana'a to Saudi Arabia for the annual ritual of Hajj, the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca required once in a lifetime of every financially-able and physically-fit Muslim, according to an AP report.

A Saudi-led military coalition closed off Sana'a's airport in August 2016 as part of an air and sea blockade on Yemen.

In addition to the Saturday's flight, two more departures have been scheduled for Monday and Wednesday, while officials from Yemen's popular Ansarullah resistance movement and Saudi authorities were working on scheduling two more flights, al-Shayyef noted as cited in the report.

Thousands of Yemeni pilgrims travel by bus to Saudi Arabia, or to the southern port city of Aden – an arduous 12-hour journey due to checkpoints – where they can fly to the neighboring country.

"We can no longer bear the burdens and hardships of traveling to Aden," Akram Mohamed Murshid, one of the pilgrims boarding the plane, said.

"Hopefully, the blockade will end and the airport will remain open. We are very happy and relieved, and I cannot describe the feeling," said Mohammad Askar, another Mecca-bound pilgrim.

The Yemeni Minister of Public Works and Roads, Ghaleb Mutlaq, said nearly 200 flights would be needed to accommodate the 24,000 people who wanted to take part in the highly spiritual pilgrimage.

Pilgrims Leave Gaza to Mecca

Meanwhile, over the past week, four batches of pilgrims departed from the Gaza Strip for Saudi Arabia to perform the rituals of Hajj.

About 6,600 people from Gaza and the West Bank left for Mecca to perform Hajj for 2023.

According to the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, the pilgrims travelled from Gaza during a four-day span, with 900 pilgrims in the first group, 900 on the second, 600 in the third, and 500 pilgrims on the fourth day.

Those travelling from the West Bank will get to Saudi Arabia through Jordan, while residents of the Gaza Strip went through Egypt.

Saudi Arabia said on Saturday it has received more than one million pilgrims so far for this year's Hajj pilgrimage.

"Around 1,150,000 pilgrims have already arrived in Saudi Arabia for Hajj," Mohammed al-Bijawi, undersecretary of the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, told the state-run Al-Ekhbariya TV channel.

"The influx of pilgrims continues to increase amid continuous preparations," he added.

The oil-rich kingdom expects to receive more than two million Muslim pilgrims for Hajj this year.

Biden's Top Adviser in Saudi Arabia to Discuss Zionist Normalization

RIYADH (Dispatches) – U.S. President Joe Biden's top adviser Brett McGurk is in Riyadh to discuss a possible normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and the occupying regime, according to a U.S. news portal.

McGurk's talks with Saudi officials "will focus on the administration's efforts to reach a normalization agreement between Israel and the kingdom as well as other issues," Axios reported.

The U.S. adviser is expected to meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during his visit.

There was no comment from the Saudi authorities on the re-

port.

McGurk's visit comes a few days after U.S. State Secretary Antony Blinken visited Saudi Arabia, where he met with several Saudi officials, including bin Salman.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said at a joint press conference with Blinken that "without finding a pathway to peace for the Palestinian people...any normalization will have limited benefits."

Saudi Arabia does not have diplomatic relations with the Zionist regime and opposes normalization with Tel Aviv until ending the decades-long occupation of

the Palestinian territories.

Six Arab countries have diplomatic ties with the occupying regime starting with Egypt in 1979, Jordan in 1994, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan in 2020.

Saudi Arabia cautiously welcomed the U.S.-brokered normalization deals between the Zionist regime and the Arab states in 2020.

The oil-rich kingdom itself, however, has been expected to jump on the bandwagon since then, as the two sides have seen growing contacts and de-facto rapprochement in recent years, despite claims that it is commit-

ted to the 2002 so-called Arab Peace Initiative, which conditions normalizing ties with the regime on the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian state within the 1967 borders.

The Riyadh regime in November 2020 granted permission for Zionist regime airlines to use its airspace, hours before the first Israeli flight to the UAE was set to take off.

Palestinian leaders, activists and ordinary people have repeatedly rejected Arab-Zionist normalization deals as "a stab in the back of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people."

Afghan Pilot Threatened With Deportation From UK

Hundreds of Afghans Languish in Albania in Prolonged U.S. Visa Process

SHENGJIN (AP/The Independent) – Almost two years since he fled Afghanistan to escape the Taliban takeover, Firooz Mashoof is still haunted by the memory of his last day in Kabul — the bus that took him to the airport, getting on a packed plane and taking off as gunfire echoed across the city.

"The last thing I saw were the mountains around Kabul and the dreary sunset as the Qatar Airways took off," he said.

Today, thousands of miles from his homeland, the 35-year-old photojournalist and former employee of the Afghan soccer federation, is languishing in warm and sunny Albania. With each passing day, his anxiety grows over the delay in the promised U.S. visa, casting a shadow on his dreams of a new beginning in America.

For hundreds of others like him, it's an emotional roller coaster. Some try to find work and live with a semblance of normalcy but the concern and fear for families back home permeates their days — even in welcoming Albania.

They are hopeful, despite the prolonged bureaucracy, and look to a new life.

In Shengjin, a town on the Adriatic coast some 70 kilometers (45 miles) northwest of the Albanian capital of

Tirana where hundreds of Afghans were given temporary shelter, Mashoof often goes for long walks by the sea. He has found work at a mall, an hour's bus ride away.

The walks stave off panic attacks that he has been forgotten — or the "crazy fear" for his family back in western Herat province.

"I was saved, ... and now I am to start my new life in America," he said, "But when?"

The Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021 as U.S. and NATO troops were in the final weeks of their withdrawal from the country after two decades of occupation and as the U.S.-backed Afghan government and military crumbled.

Despite initial promises of a more moderate rule, they soon started to enforce restrictions on women and girls, barring them from public spaces and most jobs, and banning education for girls beyond the sixth grade.

The measures harked back to the previous Taliban rule of Afghanistan in the late 1990s, when they also imposed their strict rules. The harsh rule prompted an international outcry against the already ostracized Taliban, whose administration has not been officially recognized by the United Nations or the international community.

As the Taliban pursued an ever more hard-line path, a severe economic downturn followed, despite efforts by

aid agencies to help large swaths of the impoverished nation.

In the days of the chaotic pullout, Washington had decided to take in all those who had worked for the U.S. government and American troops or for U.S.-based media organizations and nongovernmental groups in Afghanistan. But over time, the complicated visa process for Afghans who demonstrate they are at risk of persecution became protracted.

Meanwhile, an Afghan pilot who flew combat missions alongside British and U.S. forces against the Taliban said he feels "abandoned" after his UK resettlement application was rejected, the Independent reported on Saturday.

The unnamed former lieutenant in the Afghan Air Force arrived in the UK on a small boat that crossed the English Channel because there were no safe routes for him to use, he said.

The pilot, who flew more than 30 combat missions against the Taliban, is being threatened with deportation to Rwanda after his application to the Afghan relocations and assistance policy (Arap) scheme was rejected on the grounds that he was "not eligible."

The pilot was told that he did not meet the criteria for Arap because of its requirement to have been "directly employed" or "in partnership" with the UK government, armed forces or contractors, the Independent reported.

Egypt's Sisi to Visit Turkey at Erdogan's Invitation

CAIRO (MEMO) – Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is to embark on an official visit to Turkey following an invitation by his Turkish counterpart and recently re-elected President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

News of Sisi's visit was disclosed by Ambassador Salih Mutlu Sen, who currently serves as Ankara's charge d'affaires in Cairo, Daily Sabah reported.

According to diplomatic sources, cited by broadcaster NTV, Erdogan extended the invitation to Sisi after the latter called him to congratulate him on his election victory. The Egyptian president is said to have welcomed the invitation, and may visit Ankara shortly after Eid al-Adha, which starts on 28 June.

The latest diplomatic develop-

ments between the two countries follows an agreement to upgrade relations late last month by exchanging ambassadors, following years of strained ties, since Egypt's 2013 Saudi and UAE-backed military coup, which overthrew the late President Mohamed Morsi, who was a close political and ideological ally of Erdogan.

Since the democratically-elected Morsi government was overthrown, diplomatic relations between Ankara and Cairo have been mutually maintained at the level of charge d'affaires.

Back-door diplomacy between the two countries gained traction in November of last year, after Sisi and Erdogan met and shook hands at the sidelines of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.