

International

# For Syrian Kurds, leader's killing deepens the sense of US betrayal

## Kurdish leader shot dead during Turkey's Syria incursion

**BEIRUT:** Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf spent the final months of her life building a political party that she hoped would help shape Syria's future, drawing the attention of US officials who said it would have a say in what happened once the war ended. To her colleagues in the Future Syria Party and Kurdish communities in Syria's northeast more broadly, her killing became a symbol of betrayal by the United States.

As recently as Oct 3, State Department officials reassured her at a meeting that Washington would safeguard northern Syria from a threatened Turkish assault by mediating between Kurdish-led forces and Ankara, according to a colleague who was present. A state department official said the US message to Syrian partners had been consistent: that American forces would be withdrawing from the country. Days after the meeting, President Donald Trump announced US forces would quit the region, leaving it vulnerable to attack by Turkey. Kurdish fighters in northeast Syria, key allies in the US battle against Islamic State, said rebels fighting on the Turkish side murdered Khalaf. She was 34. She was slain on Oct 12 along with a driver and aide when Turkey-backed fighters stopped their SUV on the M4 highway in northern Syria, according to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and officials in her party. The spokesman for the Turkey-backed Syrian rebel force, the National Army, at the time denied its fighters killed her, saying they had not advanced as far as the M4.

Last week, the spokesman, Youssef Hammoud, said the incident was being investigated among other "breaches". "If America hadn't decided to withdraw, these factions ... would not have dared to carry out their operations in that area," said Moaz Abdul Karim, a Future Syria Party leader. The US State Department has said it was looking into reports of Khalaf's death apparently while in the hands of Turkey-backed forces, calling the reports "extremely troubling". An autopsy report circulated by the SDF said Khalaf's body had been riddled with bullets.

### American assurances

On Oct 3, US State Department representatives visited the Future Syria Party's headquarters in the Syrian city of Raqqa and told Khalaf and party president Ibrahim al-Kaftan that

American efforts in the region were aimed at mediation. Since the party was founded in 2018, its leaders say US officials have voiced their support. The party aims to attract members from across the ethnic spectrum in a region where critics said the Kurdish YPG militia had become too powerful.

"Yes, there was encouragement from the Americans to set up a party," Kaftan said. "The party was already being worked on by a team who believes in Syrian democracy. It was a Syrian idea, not an American one, but I repeat they were in favour of this idea," he told Reuters in written answers to questions. US forces withdrew from a section of the border on Oct 7, and soon afterwards Turkish troops mounted their third incursion into northern Syria since 2016. Ankara views the YPG as a terrorist threat due to their links to a Kurdish insurgency at home. It has also said its operation in Syria was designed to create a buffer where some of the 3.6 million refugees who fled the Syrian conflict into Turkey could be re-settled.

### Deeply involved

A civil engineer by training, Khalaf, was deeply involved in the politics of northeast Syria from the earliest days of the war, now in its eighth year. After leaving her job as a state employee, she helped to set up the Kurdish-led administration whose influence would eventually stretch over one third of Syria including predominantly Arab areas. In 2018, she was elected secretary general of the Future Syria Party, which was launched from Raqqa, a predominantly Arab city where the SDF defeated IS in 2017 with US backing. Kaftan, an Arab architect from Manbij, was elected its leader, and he said that US and French officials attended the ceremony.

The United States has long adopted a cautious political approach towards northern Syria, even as it backed the SDF militarily in the fight against IS. Washington opposed the emergence of the Kurdish-led autonomous region and the main Kurdish groups were always kept out of the UN political process for Syria, despite their huge influence on the ground. But according to Kaftan, US officials including the envoy for Syria James Jeffrey told members of his party that it would have a role in international talks over Syria's future.



**COLOGNE:** Kurdish protesters wave their national flags and hold photos of former Kurdish political leader Hevrin Khalaf, during a pro-Kurdish demonstration in Cologne, western Germany. —AFP

The State Department official said the United States wanted a political solution to Syria's conflict that included "full representation for all Syrians." "US officials, including Ambassador Jeffrey, made clear that this included the populations of northeast Syria and intervened repeatedly with the UN to this end." The fate of Kurds in northern Syria is now more uncertain than it has been for years. Stripped of US protection, the SDF struck a deal for Syrian government forces to deploy into the region it controlled. The SDF says Washington has stabbed it in the back. Despite the Turkish incursion,

which has sparked an exodus and killed scores of people, leaders of Future Syria Party hope it will have a role in shaping the next phase of Syria's recovery from war. Khalaf always believed the solution in Syria must come through dialogue with all concerned parties including the Syrian government and Turkey, Kaftan said. "Hevrin didn't sleep more than 4-5 hours a day," he said. "But she would always say Syria deserves a lot from us, and for the people who have suffered through nine years of war, we must seek to secure a real, safe future for them." —Reuters

## Iraq forces killed 149 protesters, most by shots to head, chest

**BAGHDAD:** An Iraqi government committee investigating a wave of unrest found that 149 civilians were killed because security forces used excessive force and live fire to quell protests, according to its report, seen by Reuters. The report, which said more than 70% of the deaths were caused by shots to the head or chest, held senior commanders responsible but stopped short of blaming the prime minister and other top officials, saying there had been no order to shoot.

Protests over high unemployment, poor public services and corruption erupted on Oct 1, prompting a violent security crackdown. Protesters blame graft and infighting among political leaders for failing to improve their lives even in peacetime, two years after Islamic State was declared defeated in Iraq.

"The committee found that officers and commanders lost control over their

forces during the protests (and this) caused chaos," the panel said in its report. "There were no official orders from the supreme authorities to security forces to open fire towards protesters or use live ammunition at all." Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi established the committee to look into the bloodshed, and he has also promised a cabinet reshuffle and reforms including steps to fight graft, and provide government jobs and land to university graduates.

But critics said his gestures were vague and appear unlikely to defuse public anger over rampant corruption. Renewed protests are planned for Friday after an almost three-week hiatus. The report recommended that the Baghdad operations commander in charge of the response to the unrest and dozens of other senior security officials be dismissed and put on trial. Its recommendations must be approved by Abdul Mahdi before being referred to prosecutors for possible trials.

### Snipers

The report said 149 civilians and eight members of the security forces were killed in a week of disturbances ending on Oct 7, and that it found evidence of sniper fire targeting protesters from inside a building in central Baghdad. "The committee found during its field



**MOSUL:** An Iraqi child walks with his school bag on the first day of school in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. —AFP

investigation shells from a sniper rifle inside an abandoned building near a petrol station in central Baghdad," the report said.

Two Iraqi security officials had told Reuters last week that Iran-backed militias deployed snipers on Baghdad rooftops during what became Iraq's deadliest anti-government protests for years. The committee report said other

contributing factors in the deadly violence was a failure to impose a curfew or to punish broadcasters for airing false reports on the protests, as well as the use of firebombs by demonstrators. The violence, Iraq's worst since an Islamic State insurgency was put down in 2017, has posed the biggest challenge to Abdul Mahdi since he took office a year ago. —Reuters

## Main figures of Lebanon under-fire political class

**BEIRUT:** Lebanese protesters who have been gathering in growing numbers for five days are demanding the complete renewal of the political class, whose main figures haven't changed in decades. Since the 1989 Taif agreement that brought to an end the 15-year civil war and defined the rules of a sectarian-based power-sharing system, the same politicians, or their relatives, have called most of the shots. They long seemed untouchable but their future is now in the balance, with protesters vowing they will not relent until Lebanon's political barons are out of the picture. Herewith penix of the country's main political figures:

### Michel Aoun, Gebran Bassil

Michel Aoun, 84, was elected in 2016 as the 13th president of Lebanon. A Maronite Christian, he once championed opposition to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and launched an ill-fated "war of liberation" in 1989. Forced into French exile by Syria, he eventually returned in 2005, after the withdrawal of Syrian forces, and became president after a spectacular shift of alliances earned him the support of his erstwhile arch-foes. Once a vocal critic of nepotism, he managed to secure a ministerial portfolio for his son-in-law Gebran Bassil and made him the leader of his party,

The 49-year-old Bassil, who is now foreign minister, is arguably the most reviled leader among the protesters, who have not spared him in often explicit slogans.

### Saad Hariri

The 49-year-old prime minister and leader of the Future Movement is the scion of an influential Sunni Muslim family. His father Rafiq, a billionaire who spearheaded Lebanon's post-civil war reconstruction, was assassinated in 2005. Saad Hariri has cast himself as a champion of economic reform held hostage by unwilling coalition partners but protesters have pilloried him all the same as a hypocrite and pure product of Lebanon's hereditary politics. His image was further tarnished last month when reports surfaced that he had sent \$16 million dollars to a South African model, even as his family group's employees were being laid off or worked unpaid.

### Nabih Berri

Nabih Berri, 81, has been parliament speaker since 1992. He was reelected last year for a new four-year mandate. He is also the most senior political representative of Lebanon's Shiite community. He leads the Amal movement, which had one of the main militias in Lebanon's civil war. A former warlord, he has remained one of Syria's main allies in Lebanon.

His critics accuse him of having abused his position to amass a colossal personal fortune and protesters in recent days bashed him and his wife Randa as some of the most egregious examples of Lebanon's patronage system. Since 1992, he has shared power in the Shiite community with the Hezbollah movement led by Hassan Nasrallah, who is a cleric and has never been a state official, though he



**BEIRUT:** Protesters trying to block a main road sit on the ground facing Lebanese soldiers in the eastern outskirts of the capital Beirut yesterday. —AFP

wields enormous political and military power.

### Walid Joumblatt

The heir of one of Lebanon's oldest political dynasties, the 70-year-old Druze leader took over from his father Kamal, who was assassinated in 1977. Also a former warlord, Joumblatt long headed the Progressive Socialist Party and is a towering figure in the Druze minority. He was nicknamed "the camelion" for his ability to shift alliances and navigate Lebanon's ruthless political game.

Some protesters see Walid Joumblatt as a symbol of the feudal nature of Lebanese politics. As head of the Druze community, he used to hold open hearings at his Mukhtara residence in his Chouf mountain

fiefdom every weekend, though his son Taymour has now taken over these duties. His PSP currently sits in government and Joumblatt also "passed on" his parliament seat to his son Taymour last year.

### Geagea, Frangieh, Gemayel

Samir Geagea, 66, rose to prominence during the civil when he took over the leadership of the Lebanese Forces militia. He opposed Syria's occupation of Lebanon and in 1994 became the first civil conflict warlord to be jailed. He was released 11 years later and returned to the political fray. He was accused by another Christian leader, pro-Syrian Sleiman Frangieh, of complicity in the 1978 murder of his parents and sister, an allegation the LF have denied. —AFP

## Netanyahu suffers defeat in failing to form government

**JERUSALEM:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has suffered an important defeat in his bid to hang on as premier by failing to form a new government, but his opponent faced similar difficulties yesterday. Ex-military chief Benny Gantz is now expected to be given the chance to try to negotiate a coalition by President Reuven Rivlin, but a deadlock following September 17 polls remains and yet another election cannot be ruled out.

It would be the third election within a year after Netanyahu also failed to form a coalition after April polls. Netanyahu's decision to inform Rivlin on Monday night that he has been unable to form a government by no means signaled the end of his tenure as Israel's longest-serving prime minister. He remains premier as long as no new government is formed, and a number of scenarios exist that could see him retain his post even as he faces the possibility of corruption charges in the weeks ahead.

One of the few things clear in Israel's post-electoral morass was that Netanyahu, who celebrated his 70th birthday on Monday, was not giving up. But his announcement was a landmark moment in Israeli politics since Netanyahu has been given the president's mandate to form a government after every election since 2009. —AFP

## Facebook steps up security amid fresh signs of meddling

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Facebook said it was tightening its security for the 2020 US elections, amid signs of fresh activity from Russia attacking Democratic presidential candidates, including Joe Biden. The leading social network said it was taking down more accounts for "inauthentic" activity and stepping up scrutiny of "state controlled" media seeking to manipulate American voters.

As Facebook unveiled its latest steps, an analysis of activity on the social platform released by the analytics firm Graphika showed accounts originating from Russia taking aim at US political candidates and issues. "Multiple accounts praised (Democratic hopeful) Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump," the Graphika report said.

"Accounts from both sides of the political spectrum attacked Joe Biden; some also attacked Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren. Almost half the accounts claimed to be based in 'swing states,' especially Florida." The report said these accounts reused messages from the Internet Research Agency which targeted US audiences in the 2016 presidential election and that "Facebook's own analysis ... showed some links to the IRA."

One of the new steps announced by Facebook calls for labeling of messages coming from state-controlled media outlets, starting next month. "We will hold these pages to a higher standard of transparency because they combine the opinion-making influence of a media organization with the strategic backing of a state," a Facebook blog post said. Facebook also said it would seek to curb the viral spread of misinformation by using a "pop-up" that will appear when people attempt to share posts on Instagram debunked by third-party fact-checkers. —AFP