

## International

# Iraq PM Kadhemi seeks to soothe security concerns on Saudi visit

## Trade and investment in focus during the long-awaited visit

**RIYADH:** Iraq will never become a launchpad for attacks on Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi pledged Wednesday during a long-awaited visit to the kingdom aimed at forging closer economic and security ties. In January, explosive-laden drones crashed into the main royal palace in Riyadh, with American media citing US officials as saying they were launched from neighboring Iraq.

Saudi officials did not publicly disclose any details on the reported attack on the sprawling Al-Yamama complex, the official residence and office of King Salman as well as the main base of the royal court. But the news raised alarm in a country that has frequently come under missile and drone attacks from Iran-aligned Houthi rebels in Yemen, where Riyadh-backed forces are engaged in a six-year conflict.

A relatively unknown militant group in Iraq calling itself the Righteous Promise Brigade claimed responsibility for the strike, but it was considered by security experts to be a front for more entrenched Iran-backed militias. Kadhemi said the group's claim was "not true" and insisted that the attack was not launched from Iraq.

"We will not allow any attack on the kingdom," he told reporters after what his aides described as an hours-long meeting with Saudi

Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. "There haven't been any attacks" from Iraq. "There have been attempts by some to... disrupt relations" between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, he added, without elaborating.

Known to maintain close personal ties with Prince Mohammed, Kadhemi walks a diplomatic tightrope as Baghdad often finds itself caught in the tug of war between Tehran and its rivals Riyadh and Washington. Kadhemi's trip comes after the countries reopened their Arar land border crossing in November for the first time since Riyadh cut off diplomatic ties with Baghdad in 1990, following Iraqi ex-dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

### Boosting trade, investment

Aside from a discussion on border security, the Iraqi premier said he and his delegation of senior ministers sought to further boost trade and economic cooperation with the kingdom during a day-long visit to Riyadh. In a statement published by Saudi state media, the two countries agreed to establish a joint fund with an estimated capital of \$3 billion, a "contribution from the kingdom" to boost investment in the Iraqi economy. Saudi Arabia's investments in Iraq are expected to rise to 10 billion riyals (\$2.67 billion)



RIYADH: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (second right) and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi (right) reviewing guard of honor at the start of a visit in the kingdom. — AFP

from just over 2 billion riyals currently, the state-run SPA news agency said.

The countries also agreed to maintain energy cooperation to maintain stability in global oil markets, the joint statement added. Iraq is the second-largest producer in the OPEC oil cartel, outranked only by Saudi Arabia. Kadhemi, whose government has sought to fast-track foreign investment including Saudi support for en-

ergy and agriculture, is pushing for deeper cooperation with Riyadh. Kadhemi was scheduled to travel to Saudi Arabia on his first foreign trip as prime minister last July, but the visit was cancelled at the last minute when King Salman was hospitalized for surgery to remove his gall bladder. His trip to Tehran, Riyadh's arch-rival, went ahead, with the premier meeting Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. — AFP

## UN Council calls on Somalia to hold elections

**UNITED NATIONS:** The UN Security Council on Wednesday called on authorities in strife-torn Somalia to resolve the electoral "impasse" and hold "inclusive" elections as soon as possible, following a closed-door emergency session on the situation. In a statement drafted by Britain and adopted unanimously, the 15 Council members "expressed concern" over the ongoing crisis and called on the country's leaders to "convene at the earliest opportunity to resolve outstanding issues."

"They emphasized that it remained in the best interests of all Somalis to ensure that inclusive elections took place as soon as possible," the statement said. Somalia missed a deadline to hold an election by February 8, when President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known by his nickname Farmajo, was due to step down, sparking a constitutional crisis in the already fragile state.

Farmajo and Somalia's five regional leaders reached an agreement on September 17 that abandoned a promised one-person, one-vote ballot but offered a common path forward for elections. But they have been unable to resolve squabbles over how the vote is to be conducted, and a coalition of opposition candidates have now said they no longer recognize Farmajo as president. "Somalia's electoral process is at a critical stage," Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, Barbara Woodward, told reporters. During the closed-door meeting, the UN envoy for Somalia, James Swan, said "the situation regarding Somalia's electoral process requires urgent attention," Woodward added. She said Britain reiterated its call on Somalia to "swiftly" reach an agreement on moving ahead with the electoral process. —AFP

## Ethiopian rebels blamed for 'terror attack' in restive west

**ADDIS ABABA:** A rebel group in Ethiopia's restive Oromia region carried out a "terror attack" this week that killed an unknown number of civilians, officials said Wednesday, while a witness put the death toll in the dozens. The attack took place in the western part of the Wollega area, where Ethiopian soldiers have been fighting an armed group known as the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Oromia regional government said in a statement.

"Although the (OLA) has been weakened by measures taken by the government together with the community to ensure rule of law, out of a feeling of desperation it continues to carry out attacks on civilians," the statement said. Oromia communications officials did not respond to requests for comment, and the statement did not provide details on fatalities or how the attack was carried out.

One resident of the Babo-Gembel district where the attack took place told AFP that gunmen arrived after 9 pm Tuesday, forced residents to gather outside in a group and shot them dead. "The place had no security cover from government security forces at the time," said the man, a guard at an Orthodox church, who spoke on condition of anonymity for safety reasons. "I found 29 bodies lying in one area, while there were other bodies scattered in nearby areas."

### Government 'silence'

Survivors of similar recent attacks in Oromia—a region

dominated by Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromos—have accused OLA fighters of targeting members of the Amhara ethnic group, the second largest. "There have been at least three occasions before the attack where flyers were distributed in the area calling for Amharas to leave," the security guard said. Tewodrose Tirfe, chairman of the Amhara Association of America based in Washington, said Wednesday that "in the month of March well over 300 Amharas including women and children have been massacred by the Oromo Liberation Army".

He also accused the government of being "silent" on massacres. OLA spokesman Odaa Tarbii denied responsibility for the attack, saying on Twitter that an investigation would "100 percent absolve" the group. In a statement earlier this week he denied it was targeting Amhara civilians.

"The Oromo Liberation Army has never at any time engaged in mass killings or ethnic cleansing," Odaa said. "There are several thousand Amharas and members of other groups that live peacefully in areas administered by us and they will testify that we do not treat them any differently."

### 'Spreading' insecurity

The OLA, believed to number in the low thousands, broke off from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an opposition party that spent years in exile but was allowed to return to Ethiopia after Abiy took office in 2018. No link has been demonstrated between the fighting in Oromia and the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government has described the campaign in Tigray as an operation to detain and disarm leaders of the local ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). But officials have long accused the TPLF of partnering with the OLA to foment ethnic violence and undermine Abiy's government—a claim the Oromia regional government reiterated in its statement Wednesday. —AFP