

Could Turkey's Kurdish peace process be back on track?

Author:

Tue, 2020-11-17 01:17

ANKARA: The debate around peace between Turkey and its Kurdish minority has re-surfaced, hinting at possible preparations by both sides to find middle ground to restart negotiations.

Political changes, shifting voting intentions and trouble along the southern border with Iraq and Syria, experts suggest, might all be playing a part in moves by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to alter his stance on issues surrounding the country's largest ethnic minority group.

The peace process between Ankara and the Kurds ended in July 2015 after the killing of two policemen in the southeastern province of Ceylanpinar, leading to the resumption of the decades-old Kurdish-Turkish conflict.

During elections in June 2015, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) passed the 10 percent threshold to become the first pro-Kurdish party to win seats in Parliament.

Part of the thinking behind a possible thaw in tensions comes from Ankara's concern that the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – which it considers a terror group linked to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey – might encourage Turkey's Kurds to try to decentralize power and create a Kurdish state along its southern border.

The PKK has fought a nearly four-decade-long war for autonomy against Turkey. Kurds make up 20 percent of Turkey's population, and such a move would have serious repercussions for Ankara were it to come to pass. Turkey has been targeting Kurdish forces in Syria and neighboring Iraq for some time in light of fears over Kurdish separatism.

Samuel Ramani, a Middle East analyst at the University of Oxford, told Arab News: "In spite of ideological divergences amongst Kurdish communities, peace negotiations between Turkey and the HDP could result in a period of Turkish restraint towards Kurdish communities in Syria and Iraq.

"Erdogan has warned about potentially launching another offensive against Kurdish militias in northern Syria, and Joe Biden's victory in the US elections has caused some to suggest that might occur before January," he added.

HIGHLIGHT

Part of the thinking behind a possible thaw in tensions comes from Ankara's concern that the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – which it considers a terror group linked to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey – might encourage Turkey's Kurds to try to decentralize power and create a Kurdish state along its southern border.

"Turkey has also stepped up strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan. As the HDP broke with

the Turkish political consensus by opposing Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 and endorsed Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum, Erdogan will be cautious not to step on the HDP's toes while negotiations are underway," Ramani said.

In the long-run, Ramani thinks that the HDP will have to accommodate Erdogan's military operations in Syria and Iraq, and weigh whether such actions might constitute a sufficient breach to derail a peace agreement. Experts note that Erdogan may also be trying to chart a new direction as a result of growing discord among his own voter base, with recent polling suggesting that opposition parties now enjoyed over 50 percent of popular support.

A political reshuffle is already underway; the country's finance minister resigned on Nov. 8, a day after the central bank governor was suddenly replaced by presidential decree.

The new period may see liberal figures returning to the political scene, as with the appointment of Lutfi Elvan to the Finance Ministry.

Yet elsewhere, problems between the Kurds and Turkish authorities abound. After a book titled "Devran," penned by Selahattin Demirtas, the former co-chair of the HDP, was branded a "terrorist document," by a Turkish prosecutor, it led to the arrest of a man named Necmettin Islek in the southeastern province of Bitlis.

On Sept. 30, a Kurdish villager, Servet Turgut, died from injuries incurred while he was in military custody, allegedly after being thrown from a helicopter, according to witness statements.

Demirtas himself, meanwhile, has been imprisoned since Nov. 4, 2016, with his attorneys recently taking his case to Turkey's top court after the country rejected to implement a European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling.

Necdet Ipekyuz, the HDP deputy for southeastern province of Batman, said despite myriad issues, nothing was off the table when it came to the peace process.

"Considering the ongoing developments in our region, the decision-makers in Ankara should have recognized that security-oriented paradigms remain inefficient to resolve the Kurdish issue. There is a need for confidence-building measures to put the resolution back on track," he told Arab News. Ipekyuz, who was involved in the last peace process, said decision-makers should learn from previous mistakes.

"I want to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It is like changing the wheel of a heavy-laden truck. Kurdish people are now afraid of being involved in politics. The state authorities should win back their hearts and minds with positive steps like backing away from appointing trustees to the Kurdish-majority towns or opening more space for freedom of speech."



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Turkey to send soldiers for Karabakh 'peacekeeping center'
Turkey probes Istanbul mayor in fight over 'crazy' canal

[Lebanese FM asks US for Bassil sanction files](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-11-17 01:12

BEIRUT: Lebanon's foreign minister has urged US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea to provide the information and documents that led to sanctions against Gebran Bassil.

Charbel Wehbe, who was made minister in Lebanon's caretaker government, met with Shea on Monday to discuss bilateral ties and the sanctions placed on the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).

The Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the meeting came "within the framework of the foreign minister's meetings with diplomats in Lebanon," meaning that Shea was not summoned.

On Nov. 6, the US Treasury imposed sanctions against Bassil, the first Lebanese official to be punished under the Magnitsky Act, the US legislation that targets human rights violations and corruption.

Individuals targeted by Magnitsky sanctions face seizure of property and financial assets, investigations into associated companies, entities and individuals and a ban on entering the US.

Following the sanctions against his son-in-law, Lebanese President Michel Aoun asked Wehbe to "make the necessary contacts to obtain the evidence and documents that prompted the US Treasury to press charges and impose sanctions against Bassil, and hand over these documents to the Lebanese judiciary in order for it to take the necessary legal measures if any information on these accusations is available."

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said: "The systemic corruption in Lebanon's political system, exemplified by Bassil, has helped to erode the foundation of an effective government that serves the Lebanese people. Lebanon has long suffered from corruption and economic mismanagement by power brokers who advance their own interests at the expense of the Lebanese people they are supposed to represent."

On Monday, the Lebanese Foreign Ministry said that Shea affirmed her country's "support for Lebanon in several areas, in addition to the issue of negotiations over the demarcation of maritime borders, the issue of the return of the displaced to their country, the stage of transition from the current administration to the new administration in the US, in addition to the measures taken by the US administration against some Lebanese, including former deputies and ministers, and the head of a parliamentary bloc."

FASTFACT

Lebanese President Michel Aoun asked Wehbe to 'make the necessary contacts to obtain the evidence and documents that prompted the US Treasury to impose sanctions against Bassil.'

Former Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti, under Prime Minister Hassan Diab, previously summoned Shea after she released statements describing Hezbollah as a "terrorist group." Following the ambassador's comments, a Lebanese judge controversially prevented media from publishing the statements or meeting with her.

Shea said during an interview with the Institute for International Strategic Studies three days ago that the US "will continue to pursue a policy of pressure on Hezbollah," adding that "the relationship of Gebran Bassil with Hezbollah constitutes a cover for the party's weapons in exchange for Hezbollah overlooking Bassil's corruption."

Shea said: "Washington is insisting on its position in helping to fight corruption in Lebanon so that progress is achieved in this field, step by step, and there will be nothing free after today.

"The US administration has not yet acted like the Gulf states, which moved away from Lebanon and stopped supporting it, and the US did not support Hassan Diab's government because it was Hezbollah that formed it, but it stood by the Lebanese people." "We will monitor what the next government will look like to determine the US position."

In light of a severe economic crisis, the formation of a rescue government headed by Saad Hariri is facing political obstacles from the FPM and other

Hezbollah allies.

MP Bilal Abdullah, a member of the parliamentary alliance Democratic Gathering, told Arab News that “The US side is not enthusiastic about any rescue mission in Lebanon and has coolly dealt with the French initiative.” Now, after the visit of French envoy to Lebanon Patrick Dorrell, which ended in failure, it seems that Lebanon will be left in isolation.” The Americans believe that it is the right time to put pressure on Lebanon.

On the other hand, Hezbollah and its allies are trying to play on time. In the midst of this, we are just around the corner from total collapse. The picture is very bleak because the state is spending its last savings and the citizens are spending their savings as well.

“Where were the objectors to the sanctions against Bassil when the Syrian regime classified the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt and the head of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea, as terrorists? They were silent at the time, but today their voices are loud against the sanctions against Bassil. People are not interested in what happens to political leaderships. If the government is not formed, the country is heading to the abyss. It is a farce.”



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Lebanon begins 2-week lockdown as COVID-19 cases surge Lebanon's Basecamp sets the pace for citizens' initiatives in fragile states

Pandemic tests the endurance of Middle East's cultural industry

Tue, 2020-11-17 00:30

DUBAI: As second and third waves of the coronavirus pandemic sweep the globe, the human and economic costs continue to mount. One area that has been found to have especially weak immunity to a disruption of this kind is arts and culture.

Governments, businesses and individuals suffered serious financial setbacks earlier in the year when the initial wave of infections led to a total lockdown in many countries.

However, those working in the creative industries proved exceptionally vulnerable to the containment measures as exhibitions and concerts got canceled, festivals postponed and many other cultural activities delayed until further notice.

UNESCO has put annual revenue from cultural and creative sectors at \$2.3 trillion and exports at more than \$250 billion. The sectors employ nearly 30 million people worldwide while some forecasts put its contribution to global gross domestic product at about 10 percent in the near future.



'Complain' (Supplied)

Even as GCC countries reopened after months of lockdown, the art world was relegated to digital platforms for the foreseeable future.

As a result, many musicians, artists, photographers and comic illustrators saw their sources of income evaporate. Some cultural enterprises were forced out of business altogether.

Although a few professionals were able to shift online, others have struggled to adapt. For Huda Alkhamis-Kanoo, founder of the Abu Dhabi Festival, digital will never compare with the real thing.

"The whole future is in this balance between virtual and real-life experience. Energy with people can't be replaced," she told a webinar in September, organized by the Washington DC-based Middle East Institute, on the impact of COVID-19 on festivals.

For Raed Asfour, an Amman-based theater director who also took part in the

webinar, new technologies can play a role in recording and streaming concerts online, but the process may be prohibitively expensive.

Eckhard Thiemann, artistic director of Shubbak, London's largest festival of contemporary Arab culture, said it may be a struggle convincing audiences to pay for concerts streamed online.

"We need to educate audiences to pay for online content. ... If we provide authentic and genuine content, people will pay for it," Thiemann said.

FASTFACT

Culture during COVID-19

*** 30m People employed worldwide in cultural and creative sectors.**

*** 10% The sectors' projected contribution to global GDP.**

For artists and the creative industries, the shift to online has been a mixed bag of experiences. For some it was an opportunity to shake up tired old formats, while for others it offered a chance to collaborate.

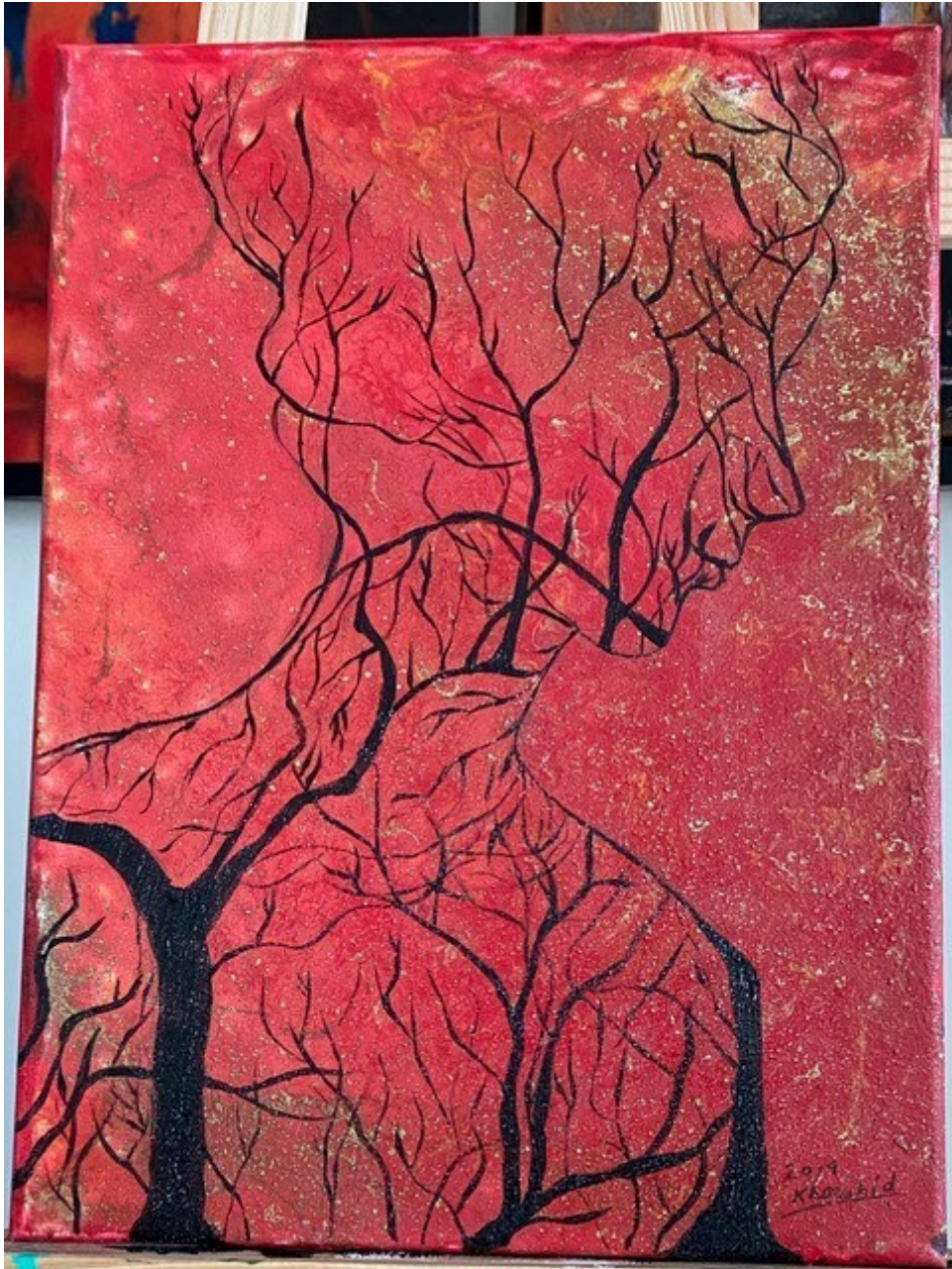
"We have over 30 music centers here in the UAE and we consider each other competitors and we rarely collaborate with each other," Tala Badri, executive director of the Centre for Musical Arts (CMA) in Dubai, told Arab News.

"But when COVID-19 hit, (we) got together and had a meeting to talk about what we were going to do to help each other. This is our livelihoods. Between us, we employ over 500 people (and) we teach over 4,000 people."

Lockdown measures have hit a sour note for music teachers as cash-strapped families cut back on their spending. "We have had no business for nearly six or seven months," Badri said.

"When the lockdown happened in March, we moved all the lessons online. ... That proved quite fortuitous for us, because we could move quickly and do that," she said.

"The difficulties and the challenges occurred more towards the summer when people really started to feel the effects of COVID-19, (when) a lot of people lost their jobs. One of the first things that goes is your extra-curricular activities, isn't it? So, a lot of people decided not to continue with lessons."



'Bitter Sweet' (Supplied)

The number of students registered with the school dropped “overnight” from 1,200 to fewer than a third. As a result, the rent, salaries for 30 members of staff, and business loan repayments soon became a major operational challenge.

“From a financial perspective, it was very difficult. I mean, we managed to cope very well, but in coping we were still not able to generate an income to keep ourselves going,” Badri said.

Emirati illustrator Saeed Arjumand, who owns a comic book store in Dubai, has seen similar challenges. “I think that was the biggest change. Out of nowhere, we had to shut down, and this was very sudden,” he said. His store reopened in summer, but business “was not as good as it used to be.”

Recognizing the challenges facing the creative industries, many artists and galleries started banding together, leading to projects and collaborations that, in all likelihood, would otherwise have not materialized.

“The best thing that happened for artists is that a lot of institutions and cultural foundations came together to offer support for us artists, who are struggling during this time,” said Fatima Albudoor, an Emirati photographer and printmaker.



“Art Jameel, for example, made an open call for artists to submit proposals and then they would give them a grant. So I applied for that and I was able to get a grant for a project which I came up with because of the lockdown.”

Another initiative was the “This Too Shall Pass” auction hosted by Sotheby’s in June in partnership with seven galleries from Dubai’s Al-Serkal Avenue.

“In the first few weeks of lockdown there were a lot of calls, discussions and surveys about how to support and preserve our arts community,” William Lawrie, founder of the Lawrie Shabibi art gallery in Dubai, told Arab News in June.

“In one of the Zoom calls, which included all of the galleries in Al-Serkal

Avenue, the idea of an auction to support the galleries and their artists was mooted, with a charitable component to benefit vulnerable people made even more disadvantaged by COVID-19.”

In May, the Saudi art gallery Athr launched an initiative to provide financial grants to help support the work of artists in the Kingdom. It launched a project titled “Maan” (Arabic for together) in a bid to cushion the impact of the pandemic on the local art scene.

As part of its mission to keep the arts sustained and accessible to a wider audience, Jeddah-based Athr collaborated with seven artists who agreed to produce limited-edition works to fund the grants.



‘Hengam’ (Supplied)

Canadian-Iranian expressionist Khorshid Akhavan says travel restrictions and a fall in commissions have taken a toll on her earnings, as customers have cut back on such luxuries. At the same time, she says, the pandemic has been a powerful source of inspiration.

“For me it has been both positive and negative, I would say,” she told Arab News. “The positive would be that all the emotions came up, so I could come up with some great art to express my feelings.”

Silver linings, perhaps. And as Alkhamis-Kanoo said during September’s webinar, the pandemic has certainly forced artists to be “more resilient” and to start working collectively.

“It is incredible what I am seeing in terms of relations and innovation,” she said. “We connect, and we find each other, and we unite through our festivals to fight back.”

Looking on the bright side, the Group of 20 culture ministers recently pledged to support the global cultural economy.

Addressing the virtual meeting, organized in the first week of November as part of the International Conferences Program, Saudi Culture Minister Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan said: “This high-level cultural presence at Saudi G20 presidency illustrates our shared belief in the vital role of culture in propelling the innovation ecosystem of economies. The onus is on us to preserve our shared heritage for future generations and to produce and disseminate culture in a sustainable manner.”

Twitter: [@jumanaaltamimi](https://twitter.com/jumanaaltamimi)



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[US sending delegation to Bahrain, Israel for first direct flight](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Mon, 2020-11-16 21:06

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy, Avi Berkowitz, will lead a US delegation to Bahrain and Israel this week to discuss expanded economic cooperation between the two countries, a senior White House official said on Monday.

Berkowitz, part of a team led by Trump senior adviser Jared Kushner to help negotiate the Bahrain-Israel deal, will join Bahraini officials on the first-ever direct commercial flight from Bahrain to Israel.

The flight on Wednesday will depart Manama and arrive in Tel Aviv, where the US and Bahraini delegations will participate in meetings with senior Israeli officials.

The Trump administration has helped broker normalization deals between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan.

Trump national security adviser Robert O'Brien told the Global Security Forum on Monday that he hoped the incoming administration of Democrat Joe Biden, should he be certified as winner of the Nov. 3 presidential election, would pursue more such deals between Israel and Arab nations.



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Analysts debate impact of Israel-UAE-Bahrain accords at Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate
Israeli parliament votes to endorse Bahrain ties

[Amnesty: Iran blacked out internet to hide 'true scale' of 2019 killings](#)

Mon, 2020-11-16 23:11

LONDON: One year since anti-regime protests rocked Iran, a new report by Amnesty International has exposed how Tehran used a massive internet shutdown to hide the "true scale of the unlawful killings by security forces."

The human rights group on Monday said it had verified 304 people killed by security forces during the November 2019 protests, 23 of them children, but it suspects the real number is far higher.

Tehran instigated a violent crackdown after demonstrations against a huge increase in the price of fuel morphed into widespread protests against the

regime.

[#Iran](#)'s authorities deliberately shut down the internet during nationwide protests in [#BloodyNovember](#) 2019, hiding the true scale of unlawful killings by security forces.

Our new research: <https://t.co/Xbxa15CD6G>
pic.twitter.com/dbfh09lBgP

– Amnesty International (@amnesty) [November 16, 2020](#)

One of the distinguishing features of the crackdown, Amnesty said, was the implementation of an internet blackout that began on the deadliest day of the protests as a way to “hide the killings.”

Amnesty's report said: “Security forces used lethal force unlawfully against the vast majority of protesters and bystanders killed, shooting most to the head or torso, indicating intent to kill. To this day, no official has been held accountable for the unlawful killings.”

Mansoureh Mills, Iran researcher at Amnesty, told Arab News that the internet blackout was “a calculated move to stop more than 80 million people inside Iran from reaching the outside world and sharing information about the human rights violations that were being perpetrated by the authorities.”

He said shutting down the internet for an extended period meant that protesters removed recorded evidence of human rights abuses from their phones for fear that it would be used against them if detained.

He added that people interviewed by Amnesty had deleted swathes of evidence documenting human rights abuses for this reason.

“Imagine all the video footage that has been lost in this way because of the internet shutdown. All of the evidence of crimes and serious human rights violations are gone forever,” said Mills.

He urged the international community to take action through the UN against Tehran. “International accountability is the only way to ensure non-repetition of what we know happened in November 2019, otherwise the Iranian authorities will know that they can get away with killing unarmed men, women and children under the cover of an internet shutdown,” he said.

Sadeq Saba, an editor at Persian-language media organization Iran International, told Arab News that Tehran “is really scared of the internet and social media in general. They can control traditional media and news in

the country, but not what people say online and the news coming in from outside the country, so they try to shut down the whole thing.”

The regime’s war against freedom of speech “is a losing battle. Doing things like shutting down the internet may work for a while, but in the end they just become more ridiculous in the eyes of the people,” he said.

“Shutting down the internet doesn’t solve anything. There are deep-rooted problems in the Islamic Republic. The regime is a failure in every sense: Ideologically, economically, politically and diplomatically. They want to run a modern, 21st-century country with rules made in the Middle Ages. This is the root of the problem,” Saba added.

“Iranians are fed up with this regime. They’re doing their best to fight the Islamic Republic, and they’ll continue to do so whether their communications are restricted or not.”



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US State Department threatens actions against Iran on protests anniversary US

plans sanctions on Iranians for violence against protesters