

# In northwest Syria, children tossed about by war and exile

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-21 01:26

DARET EZZA, Syria: Mustafa and Ines were helping their parents load the van once again to flee advancing Syrian troops, when bombardment hit the area and sowed panic on the street.

The 12-year-old boy flinched and leapt onto the truck stacked with rugs and mattresses, followed by his 10-year-old sister, her face contorted by fear.

The scene has become routine for residents of northwestern Syria, where Russian-backed government troops have been conducting a devastating offensive to flush rebels out of their last bastion.

The government has made major gains since December, prompting 900,000 people to flee their homes and shelters in the thick of winter in the biggest displacement of civilians of the nearly nine-year conflict.

“Our life boils down to this now – bombs and fear,” said the children’s father Abu Mohammed.

The town of Daret Ezza lies west of Syria’s second city Aleppo and close to the border with Turkey that remains firmly closed.

It was only a month ago that, forced on the road by a previous phase of the offensive, he washed up in this hilly region still controlled by jihadists and their rebel allies.

## **NUMBER**

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The man in his fifties is originally from the south of Idlib province, which the government forces retook weeks ago, at the beginning of their push north.

“We’re scared for our children, this is what leads us to leave every time,” Abu Mohammed said.

To live in Daret Ezza, his family had to rent a single-room workshop with blackened walls, separated from the concrete yard by nothing but a torn plastic sheet.

“This is what we could afford,” Abu Mohammed said. The family spent the winter coughing and sneezing, he said. In some mountain areas of Idlib and

neighboring Aleppo province, the temperature dipped to minus 7 Celsius and several children have died of exposure.

As an estimated 3 million people, half of them children, get cornered in an ever shrinking enclave, aid groups warn of an unprecedented humanitarian emergency.

"The situation is getting worse, fear is growing, we can't calm the children down when they hear a jet or a bomb," the father said.

Hiding under a black winter coat and a green woolly hat, Ines is the most traumatized of Abu Mohammed's four children.

"She freezes completely when the bombardment starts," her father said.

"I block her ears and tell her 'Don't be scared, it's far away, there won't be strikes'. But still she screams and cries," he said.

At night she sleeps with her head under the pillow, so as not to hear the warplanes passing overhead.

Even as the truck got ready to move, Abu Mohammed wasn't sure where his family would sleep next.

"We might spend the night with a cousin who took a tent as he left," he said.

Abu Mohammed said they would head toward Azaz, a town considered safer because it lies on the Turkish border.

The truck is so packed that some will have to endure the ride balancing on top of the pile of mattresses in the back.

A stove, a sewing machine and some cooking pots had to be left behind.

A moving video of a father teaching his three-year-old daughter to treat air strikes and shelling as a game was widely shared on social media this week, drawing more attention to the plight of children in the conflict.

According to Save The Children, at least seven children have died since December from the cold or bad living conditions in the camps for the displaced.

Most of the nearly 1 million people displaced by the offensive on Idlib are women and children, who often have to burn furniture or whatever they can find to keep warm.

The United Nations has called for a cease-fire to help tackle what it has warned could become the worst humanitarian disaster of the war.

But on Wednesday Russia blocked a cease-fire resolution at the UN Security Council.



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## [It's time to implement radical changes, says Algeria's new president](#)

Fri, 2020-02-21 01:01

Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who succeeded longtime leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika in December, asked in the face of his country's insistent protest movement for time to implement "radical changes," in an interview published on Thursday.

The interview with French daily Le Figaro was Tebboune's first since his election in Dec. 12 polls that were rejected by the year-old "Hirak" protest movement that forced out Bouteflika and marked by a record 60-percent abstention rate.

"We cannot reform, repair and restore that which was destroyed over a decade in two months," Tebboune told Le Figaro.

Tebboune has been slammed by protesters as representing the ruling elite they want removed, having served several times as minister and once briefly as prime minister during Bouteflika's two-decade rule.

Tebboune, who after his election "extended a hand" to the Hirak movement to build a "new Algeria," said he has prioritized "political reforms."

"I am determined to go far in making radical changes to break with bad practices, clean up the political sphere and change the approach to governing."

Revising the constitution is the "priority of priorities," he said.

## **SPEEDREAD**

The interview with French daily Le Figaro was Abdelmadjid Tebboune's first since his election in Dec. 12 polls that were rejected by the year-old 'Hirak' protest movement that forced out Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

"The limits," he added, are those elements "relating in particular to national identity and national unity. "Everything else is negotiable."

"The second area of work will be that of the electoral law," to give legitimacy to parliament, "which will have to play a larger role," he said, underscoring the need to "separate money from politics."

He said "things are starting to calm" in the streets and that "the Hirak got almost everything it wanted," including the departure of Bouteflika last April and figures from the "old regime" as well as the arrests of officials and businessmen suspected of corruption.

Even as the unprecedented popular movement has thinned in numbers since December, protesters still turn out in droves every Friday, keeping up demands for a complete overhaul of the system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

In his interview, Tebboune dismissed any notion that he – like his predecessors – was a president chosen by the army, a pillar of the regime.

"I feel indebted only to the people who elected me freely and openly. The army supported and accompanied the electoral process, but it never determined who would be president."

Tebboune is, however, considered to have been close to the late General Ahmed Gaid Salah, powerful army chief for 15 years until his death on Dec. 23.

Gaid Salah wielded de facto power in Algeria between Bouteflika's resignation in the face of mass street protests last April 2 and Tebboune's succession.

"The army ... is not concerned with politics, investment or the economy," Tebboune said, contradicting most observers who say the army's top brass have

influence in all those spheres.

The president said he also wants to reform the economy, which has been battered by the low price of oil – on which Algeria’s economy is dependent – and “unbridled imports, which generate overcharging, one of the sources of corruption.”



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## [Iranian scarf campaigner calls for vote boycott](#)

Fri, 2020-02-21 00:57

GENEVA: Anti-headscarf campaigner Shaparak Shajarizadeh once believed in the potential for change in Iran but is now so despondent she is calling for a boycott of Friday’s parliamentary elections in the Islamic republic.

Shajarizadeh became a dissident in 2018 when she was arrested for repeatedly removing her headscarf in public and waving it on the end of a stick, as part

of a women's rights protest that caused a social media storm.

"The Iranian people lost their hopes ... I was among those who had some hopes. But now it is like choosing between bad and worse," the 44-year-old women's rights campaigner told AFP in Geneva, where she was attending an annual conference for human rights activists.

Shajarizadeh said the supposed political choice in Iran between reformist and conservative politicians was like picking between "two faces of the same coin."

Thousands of reformist and moderate candidates are in any case being barred from contesting the elections – something that critics say could turn the vote into a choice between conservatives and ultra-conservatives.

Iranians "lost their hopes," particularly after a bloody crackdown last year on fuel price protests, she said.

Shajarizadeh calls President Hassan Rohani, who was first elected in 2013 and again in 2017 and was once seen as a possible force for change, a "so-called reformer."

The protest movement against Iran's Islamic dress code began when in December 2017 when a woman, Vida Mohavedi, stood on a pillar box on Enghelab Avenue in Tehran without the mandatory long coat and raised her veil on a stick.

Enghelab means revolution in Farsi and the square and avenue are among the busiest areas in the capital.

Movahedi's move sparked similar protests by other women like Shajarizadeh and they soon won recognition as "Dokhtaran-e-Enghelab," or the Girls of Revolution Street.

"Young women are back in the streets," she said – a reference to other demonstrations in recent years which have seen women taking a leading role.

During her visit to Geneva, Shajarizadeh received a prize for her defense of women's rights in Iran but she talks about herself as an ordinary person whose life changed completely when she decided to join the protest.

She was arrested three times and beaten for her defiance.

She decided to run away, crossing the mountains into Turkey on foot with her head covered to avoid detection.

She now lives in Toronto in Canada with her husband and their 11-year-old son, from where she is still campaigning against the obligation of wearing the hijab.

The BBC has listed her as one of the world's most influential women and she has written a book about her story with Canadian journalist Rima Elkouri.

Her lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, is a leading women's rights campaigner in her

own right and is currently in prison.

Shajarizadeh said “targeted sanctions” on the government could help change the situation in Iran but these should be designed “not to put more difficulties on the people.”

Ultimately she thinks the best agents of change are civil society movements like her own and the “real heroes” are the women who decide to show their hair in public.



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## [Egypt's street music 'more dangerous than new coronavirus'](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-21 00:53

CAIRO: An Egyptian ban on performances of a popular form of street music,

branded "more dangerous than coronavirus," has sparked uproar in the country.

Singers of mahraganat (Arabic for festivals) have been accused of overstepping moral boundaries with their controversial "low-taste" lyrics.

The row erupted after the Egyptian Musicians Syndicate on Sunday ordered a ban on mahraganat artists performing their rapid-fire electronic music at clubs, cafes, hotels, concert venues, and even on Nile cruise boats.

One MP has called on the Egyptian Parliament to hold a debate on the matter and the country's Supreme Council for Media Regulation is considering a bar on TV appearances by mahraganat singers.

But the performers themselves have hit back, with one lawyer filing a lawsuit calling the decision a violation of the Egyptian constitution as well as the nation's rules on freedom of expression in arts.

The latest condemnations came after a huge Valentine's Day concert held in Cairo International Stadium at which numerous mahraganat singers performed. Among them was Hassan Shakoosh who sang his hit song "Bint Al-Giran" (The girl next door) that includes the lyrics, "drinking alcohol and smoking hash."

Following the concert, Musicians Syndicate President Hany Shaker issued a statement banning the songs and said: "All sections of society reject the wave that threatens Egyptian art and culture." The style of music contained negative meanings and promoted immoral behavior, he added.

Shaker, a famed singer himself who began his career in the 1970s, pointed out that under the syndicate's terms and conditions, members had a duty to adhere to social and moral values and use lyrics that "did not incite immorality or bad habits."

He said Shakoosh had used inappropriate words that went against the traditions and values of Egyptian society, adding that where necessary he would be reviewing singing licenses and syndicate memberships.

President of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, Makram Mohamed Ahmed, said: "We are investigating the issue through the council complaints committee and we will take certain decisions and measures."

Banned mahraganat artist, Kozbara, whose singing partner Hangara is an Uber driver, said he was "sick and looking for a job at a gas station."

However, Egyptian Parliament spokesman, Salah Hasaballah, described the mahraganat singers as "more dangerous than the new coronavirus."

Other MPs said the music should be banned "to protect public taste" while some politicians called for a less heavy-handed approach by urging singers to select their lyrics more carefully in accordance with morals and good taste.

MP Abdel-Hamid Kamal filed a report to Parliament Speaker Ali Abdel-Aal calling on the Egyptian Minister of Culture Inas Abdel-Dayem to hold a



session to discuss what he described as “low-taste art” and how it affects society. In his report, Kamal said that the spread of mahraganat music could have a negative impact on future generations.

Member of the media and culture committee in Parliament, novelist Youssef El-Kaeed, backed Kamal saying the music “mutilated” public taste and spread undesired types of arts. He appealed for officials to act over the situation and warned that the ban could fuel popularity for the music and make its singers even more famous.

El-Kaeed blamed the media for being partly responsible for promoting the phenomenon by giving publicity to singers.

Osama Sharshar, a member of Egypt’s parliamentary culture and media committee, said he was not against mahraganat songs or folk music “provided that they take into account preserving public taste.”

He added that the Art Production Monitoring Authority, which issued licenses to produce art works in Egypt, had a role to play in determining whether such songs were commensurate with public taste.

“We cannot artistically execute mahraganat singers. We need to redirect their singing compass in the right direction by choosing proper lyrics that match our culture and traditions,” Sharshar said.



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Meet the Egyptian sisters revitalizing classical music  
Egypt pulls plug on popular street music

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## [UN tries to salvage Libya talks after Tripoli govt withdraws](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-02-20 03:15

GENEVA/CAIRO: The UN tried to salvage talks over a cease-fire for Libya on Wednesday after the government based in Tripoli said it was pulling out after a single day to protest against the shelling of the capital's port.

Talks began on Tuesday in Geneva between the internationally recognized Tripoli government and its main rivals, the eastern-based Libya National Army (LNA), which has been trying to take the capital.

Late on Tuesday, the government said it would suspend its participation after the LNA shelled Tripoli port in the latest of several strategic plays by troops loyal to eastern commander Khalifa Haftar that have coincided with attempts to ease tensions.

### **Delegations in Geneva**

UN Libya envoy Ghassan Salame was trying to convince the Tripoli delegation to stay in Geneva and resume indirect talks, a source close to the talks said and the UN confirmed.

"Delegations are still here (in Geneva) and Dr. Salame has a meeting today with the head of the GNA delegation," said Jean El-Alam, spokesman for the UN Libya mission, referring to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord.

"The mission leadership is in contact with the GNA in Tripoli and member states to keep the momentum going."

In a separate statement, the UN mission said it was "expressing its strong and renewed condemnation of the bombing of Tripoli's seaport yesterday by the Libyan National Army."

There was no immediate comment from either side.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Haftar and they discussed to resolve the conflict in the north African state, the ministry said in a statement.

They agreed a political settlement is the only option for Libya, according to RIA news agency.

Shoigu and Haftar also discussed “the important role of talks” held in Moscow in January as well as “the need to fulfil” terms agreed at an international summit in Berlin later last month, Moscow said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Wednesday that outside players should push both sides in Libya to sit down for peace talks.

“All those who in one way or another influence political or other forces in Libya should stimulate them to sit down for talks. The first steps in this direction were taken but now additional difficulties are coming up again,” Lavrov said while meeting his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Safadi in Moscow, RIA Novosti news agency reported.

Nearly nine years after rebel fighters backed by NATO airstrikes overthrew Muammar Qaddafi, Libya still has no central authority. The streets are controlled by armed groups, with rival governments based in Tripoli and the east.

## **HIGHLIGHTS**

- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Haftar and they agreed a political settlement is the only option for Libya, according to RIA news agency.
- Since the LNA marched on Tripoli nearly a year ago, fighting has displaced 150,000 people.

Since the LNA marched on Tripoli nearly a year ago, fighting has displaced 150,000 people. Both sides have support from an array of foreign governments, with Turkey supporting the Tripoli government.

The Geneva meetings have so far been held in different rooms, with Salame shuttling between the parties. Another round of talks is scheduled next week in Geneva.

The latest attack is part of an emerging pattern amounting to an apparent power play by the commander.

Haftar’s forces last month shut down Libya’s main oil ports as European and Arab powers and the US were meeting with his supporters in Berlin aimed at halting the campaign to capture the capital.

In 2019, eastern military forces moved to western Libya just as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres arrived.

The LNA initially said its strikes on Tuesday had targeted a Turkish vessel bringing weapons. It later said it had hit an arms depot.

The port is the main entry gate for wheat, fuel and other imports for Tripoli and has also been used by Turkey to send military trucks and other equipment

to its government allies.



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EU begins air, sea patrols off Libyan coast