

Turkey detains dozens as protests mark May Day rally

Author:

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ISTANBUL, ANKARA: Istanbul police detained dozens of people who were trying to hold a May Day rally at city center square on Wednesday in defiance of a protest ban.

Some 127 people were detained attempting to make their way to an unauthorized demonstration at Taksim Square, a traditional focal point of protest in the city, according to Istanbul police, who barricaded nearby roads including the bustling Istiklal Avenue.

Protesters were pinned roughly to police vehicles during the arrests, AFP correspondents said, while tourists in the area were also subjected to baggage searches.

The annual workers' holiday is often marked by confrontation between demonstrators and police.

Several thousand people were able to attend an officially approved event in the Istanbul district of Bakirkoy, including members of workers' unions and opposition political parties, a correspondent said.

Istanbul election

Tensions are heightened in Istanbul after March 31 local elections.

The opposition's Ekrem Imamoglu narrowly defeated the candidate of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to become Istanbul mayor but the AKP has officially requested a rerun of the vote in the city.

One of the protesters taking part in Bakirkoy, Mustafa Comert, said Turkey was at "at a turning point, that change has begun."

He added: "This May 1 will be even more beautiful. It is obvious that this is a consequence of the elections."

Planned May Day rallies in Sanliurfa, southeastern Turkey, were marred when a bus carrying workers from the southern province of Kahramanmaras overturned, killing five people and injuring 12, state news agency Anadolu reported.

Poll setbacks

A month after local elections which saw it lose control of Turkey's two largest cities, officials in AKP are questioning an alliance with nationalists which some blame for one of its biggest electoral setbacks.

Under a deal between AKP and the smaller Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the nationalists fielded no mayoral candidate in the capital Ankara or Istanbul in the March 31 vote, and the AKP stood aside in other regions.

But the deal failed to prevent the secularist Republican People's Party, which had a similar pact with other smaller opposition parties, winning the mayoralty in both cities, ending a quarter century of control by the AKP and its predecessors.

The AKP is still challenging its narrow loss in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city and business hub where Erdogan himself served as mayor before the party swept to power nationally in 2002. It has dominated Turkish politics ever since.

While the Istanbul appeal drags on, the rare defeat has prompted questions within the party over campaign strategy. Although the alliance helped them win a majority of votes nationwide, AKP officials say it has delivered limited benefits.

"The MHP gained a lot from this alliance, more than us," a senior AKP official in Ankara told Reuters.

Another AKP official said the MHP's 71-year-old leader Devlet Bahçeli, once a staunch critic of Erdogan, was an unpredictable ally.

The AKP relies on the MHP for its parliamentary majority, meaning any break in the pact would leave it looking for new partners – a significant challenge after Erdogan's blistering criticism of his opponents during the campaign.

Fracture

But that has not stopped talk of a split. The senior official said that if Turkey's electoral board rules against a re-run of the Istanbul vote requested by the AKP, there was little incentive to maintain the alliance.

"Depending on the decision, the fate of the alliance will be determined. It is not possible to say where the alliance will go in the short-term, but the fracture has become noticeable now," he said.

An MHP official said that while differences with the AKP were emerging in public, the nationalists would not be the side to end what the parties have called their "People's Alliance."

Bahçeli said he remained committed to the pact. "This is our basic choice, our national and strategic goal," he said in a statement on Wednesday. "There is undoubtedly no need to search for other alliances."

The stunning setbacks for the AKP in Ankara and Istanbul prompted sharp public criticism last week from a politician once at the heart of Erdogan's administration.

Former AKP prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu condemned his party's alliance with the nationalists, saying it was damaging "both in terms of voter levels and

the party's identity.”

Davutoglu, who served as premier between 2014 and 2016, also slammed the AKP's economic policies, media restrictions and the damage he said it had done to the separation of powers and Turkey's institutions.

Since the election, Erdogan has appeared to downplay the significance of the MHP, pointing to its 7 percent share of the vote. Bahceli said the remarks were “unfair and unjust,” given that his party had chosen not to stand in Turkey's three largest cities.

After CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu was physically attacked at a soldier's funeral last month, Erdogan struck a more conciliatory tone with a call for unity.

“On matters that concern the survival of our country, we must move all together with 82 million as the TURKEY ALLIANCE, putting aside our political differences,” he tweeted.

Analysts say his reference to national unity may be largely rhetorical, and the opposition says it rings hollow after he repeatedly accused the CHP and its Iyi (Good) Party allies during the election campaign of supporting terrorism.

“Some people within the AKP are doing self-criticism. This bothers Erdogan. How could a person who can't even tolerate self-criticism within his own party preach democracy?” CHP Deputy Chairman Muharrem Erkek said. “His own words show he is not sincere in the ‘Turkey Alliance’ rhetoric.”



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Turkish police block Armenian 'genocide' rally in Istanbul
Erdogan's AKP loses Ankara in poll, opposition claims Istanbul too

[Palestinians face financial crisis as US prepares Mideast plan](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-05-01 22:44

RAMALLAH: Israel and the US are putting the financial squeeze on the Palestinian Authority (PA), where opposition to a long-awaited US peace plan and anger over Israeli sanctions remain strong.

Analysts see steep cuts in US aid to the Palestinians over the past year as an attempt to draw them toward a blueprint that Washington promises will have economic benefits but which the PA predicts will fall short of endorsing Palestinian statehood.

And during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's successful re-election campaign, his right-wing government imposed sanctions that have pushed the Authority toward financial crisis.

In February, Israel announced it would cut by 5 percent the approximately \$190 million in tax revenues it transfers to the Palestinian Authority each month from imports that reach the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

The deducted sum represents the amount of money paid by the Authority, which exercises limited self-rule in the West Bank, to families of Palestinians convicted and jailed by Israel for security offenses, including lethal attacks on Israelis. Palestinians hail their jailed brethren as heroes in a struggle for an independent state and their families as deserving of support.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has refused to accept the partial tax remittances from Israel, saying the PA is entitled to all the money under interim peace deals.

Unless the issue is resolved, the World Bank says, the Palestinians' financing gap could exceed \$1 billion in 2019, putting further strain on an economy grappling with a 52 percent unemployment rate.

Already facing international donor fatigue, the Palestinians were dealt a heavy blow by the Trump administration's cut last year of hundreds of millions of dollars of aid. In February, the US Agency for International Development announced it had ceased all assistance to the West Bank and Gaza.

While the US and Israel are applying financial pressure to the Palestinian Authority for different reasons, it is happening just as the PA is being leant on to accept the US peace plan.

Palestinian suspicions over the still-secret US proposals, due to be announced in June, and defiance of Israeli sanctions continue to run deep despite the arm-twisting.

Salary cuts

Khalid Al-Asili, the PA's economy minister, told Reuters in an interview last week that it has been struggling to manage on just 36 percent of budgeted revenues.

The Authority slashed the salaries of government employees in February, March and April to weather the budget crisis, with some Palestinian public servants' wages cut in half.

"Unless they find a solution ... it will be a disaster for the Palestinian economy," Asili said.

With Trump's "deal of the century" about to be unveiled, Tareq Baconi, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, questioned the wisdom of Washington's financial pressure on the Palestinians.

Such a strategy, he said, stemmed from the "misguided belief that economic benefits could be sufficiently compelling for Palestinians to relinquish their political demands."

One of the architects of the Trump plan, the president's adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, declined to say in public remarks in Washington last week whether it called for a two-state solution, a goal of past efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Abbas and his officials have refused to deal at a political level with the Trump administration since the US president's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and his move of the US embassy to the holy city last May.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh has rejected out of hand "any political initiative that does not call for ending Israeli occupation and establishing an independent and sovereign Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital."

The Palestinians have long sought to set up a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territory Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East War.

Netanyahu further clouded the statehood issue when he said during the

election race that he would annex Israeli settlements in the West Bank if he wins, a move that Palestinian leaders said would kill any prospects of peace.

Risks for both sides

While both sides await the US proposals, the financial sanctions on the Palestinian Authority could be a double-edged sword, posing risks to its stability and for Israel as well.

“Given that the PA’s main source of legitimacy is its capacity to employ a considerable proportion of the Palestinian workforce, internal discontent could challenge its ability to govern effectively,” Baconi said.

For Israel, weakening the Palestinian Authority could have an impact on Palestinian security forces that cooperate with the Israeli military in the West Bank.

“Israel takes it for granted that it has not experienced any major terrorist attack for years now,” said Avraham Sela, professor emeritus of international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

“Coordination with the PA is invaluable for Israel’s security,” he said.

Economy Minister Eli Cohen, a member of Netanyahu’s security Cabinet, said on Monday that Israel has “no interest” in the Authority’s collapse.

But, he said on Israel’s Reshet TV, withholding tax revenues equivalent to the sums of “stipends and pensions being paid to terrorists” is justifiable.

‘Catastrophic cuts’

In the West Bank city of Ramallah, Kadhim Harb, 50, who works in the Economy Ministry, said the salary reductions have forced him to delay loan payments.

“We are cutting back on everything. We only buy basic things,” Harb, said.

A police officer in Gaza, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Ahmed, said his wages were slashed by 65 percent in March.

“Salary cuts? Please say: Catastrophic cuts. I haven’t been able to pay my son’s university tuition this semester,” said Ahmed, 39.

Donor countries and institutions have stepped in to try to plug the growing budget deficit.

At Abbas’s urging, the Arab League at a meeting in Cairo last week promised \$100 million per month to the PA.

Those pledges would add to an increase in funds from Gulf Arab states following the US cuts. Saudi Arabia in 2018 gave \$222 million to the Authority, up from \$92 million in 2017, the World Bank said. Kuwait contributed \$53 million last year.

Still, the PA faced a significant financing gap in 2018 – some \$400 million,

or roughly 10 percent of its budget – forcing it to accrue arrears on loans from local banks and other private sector financiers.



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Palestine banker calls for Mideast quotas for women board members
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[Escalation in Syria's Idlib displaces nearly 140,000: UN](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-05-01 22:24

BEIRUT: Fighting in northwestern Syria has displaced nearly 140,000 people since February, the UN said on Wednesday, as the regime and its ally Russia have stepped up their bombardment.

“Since February, over 138,500 women, children and men have been displaced

from northern Hama and southern Idlib,” said David Swanson of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA.

“Between 1 and 28 April, its estimated more than 32,500 individuals have moved to different communities in Aleppo, Idlib and Hama governorates,” he told AFP.

Idlib has been protected from a massive regime offensive by a September deal inked by Damascus ally Russia and opposition backer Turkey.

But the region of some 3 million people has come under increasing bombardment since the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham group took full control of it in January.

The escalation has killed more than 200 civilians since February, the UN said last week.

A new wave of shelling and airstrikes this week targeted schools and medical centers, according to Swanson.

“The UN is deeply concerned over the recent escalation,” he said.

The attacks targeted parts of Hama and southern Idlib, including the village of Al-Qasabiyah.

“The majority of the Al-Qasabiyah village residents reportedly displaced to safer villages due to hostilities in the area,” Swanson said.

AFP correspondents saw intense bombardment of Al-Qasabiyah Wednesday, with bombs dropped by warplanes sending huge plumes of grey smoke billowing into the sky.

Vehicles loaded with mattresses, carpets and even household appliances like refrigerators and washing machines could be seen leaving villages in southern Idlib.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on Wednesday said that regime shelling over the past two days has been the most intense since the agreement between Moscow and Ankara.

The US on Tuesday urged Russia to abide by its commitments and stop an “escalation” in Idlib.

“The violence must end,” State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said in a statement.

An estimated 3 million people live in Idlib and adjacent opposition-held territory, 1.7 million of whom were already displaced from other parts of Syria since the conflict erupted in 2011.

The figure for those displaced there since February is more than double the number of people forced to move during battles against Daesh in eastern Syria between December and March.

OCHA on Wednesday said more than 63,000 people were displaced from territory held by Daesh in southeastern Deir Ezzor between December and March as a US-backed force snuffed out its self-declared proto-state.

The civil war in Syria has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it began.



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US urges Russia to end 'escalation' in Syria's Idlib
Idlib assault 'not now,' says Russia

[Despite full reservoirs, Iraq water crisis far from over](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-05-01 22:10

AL-MASHAHADA, IRAQ: After plentiful winter rains, Iraq is heading into summer with overflowing reservoirs and lush marshes. But don't be fooled, observers

warn: Its water woes and related protests are not over.

Far from last year's shortages, "the land between the two rivers" is expected to hold 42 billion cubic meters in its reservoirs at the start of summer, more than twice the 2018 amount.

But that has not washed away longstanding challenges: Poor infrastructure, few funds, sharing disputes with neighbors, climate change and population booms.

Nestled between palms and tall reeds north of Baghdad, the Al-Mashahada pumping station is punched through with bullet holes, its metal pipes and cisterns rusted.

Broken plastic pipes litter the dirt road leading up to it.

At another overgrown station nearby, a main tank leaks a steady stream, day and night.

These stations are par for the course in Iraq, whose water infrastructure dates back decades and has been worn by consecutive wars, sanctions blocking spare part imports, the US-led invasion and finally, Daesh.

Parts of the network were installed over 60 years ago in soil that can be corrosive when wet, said Iraqi environmental expert Azzam Alwash.

"So you have a network with corroded pipes full of holes," he said, that could leak out as much as 60-70 percent of pumped water before it reaches households or farmlands.

Once there, it is hardly used responsibly, with farmers relying on wasteful flood irrigation and families leaving taps running unnecessarily.

The UN estimates Iraq's daily per capita water consumption is nearly double the world standard of 200 liters (52 gallons).

In 2014, Iraq prepared a 20-year, \$180-billion plan to manage its water crisis. But it was stillborn, as Daesh seized a third of the country the same year and money was diverted to fight it.

"We've needed a new station for years, but the funding totally froze in 2014 for military purposes," said Ahmad Mahmud, who heads Al-Mashahada's water resources.

Despite Daesh's defeat in 2017, promised funds never came, he told AFP, and a new station is now being built by UN children's agency UNICEF.

"I couldn't afford pipes without them," Mahmud admitted.

Mehdi Rasheed, who heads Iraq's dam projects, said the ministry's budget was "almost zero" as Iraq fought Daesh.

Last summer, massive protests over water shortages put the spotlight squarely

on services, and Iraq's government appeared to take notice.

It allocated nearly \$760 million to the Water Ministry for this year – about 60 percent higher than for 2018.

"It's reassuring, but it's just a good start," Mehdi said.

It remains one of the smallest ministerial budgets, around 15 times less than the Electricity Ministry.

Even Iraq's premier has admitted the water systems are not ready for summer, when temperatures in Iraq can reach a blistering 55 degrees Celsius.

"I would not be faithful if I said infrastructure is ready to receive all this," Adel Abdel Mahdi said, speaking in English.

Iraq's shortages can also be sourced beyond its borders.

Roughly 70 percent of its water originates from its neighbors, according to the International Energy Agency, with the Euphrates winding from Turkey through Syria, while the Tigris – also from Turkey – is fed by rivers from Iran.

As Turkey and Iran have developed their own dams and reservoirs, flows to Iraq have dropped.

"We used to get about 15 billion cubic meters of water a year from Iran, we no longer get that," due to dams and rerouted rivers, said Alwash, the expert.

And when Turkey fills its massive Ilisu dam, levels in the Tigris are expected to sink even further.

Iraq is negotiating with both neighbors to reach water-sharing agreements, but its position as a receiving country gives it little leverage.

Grinding on slowly behind the man-made disasters is climate change, with the World Bank predicting more severe droughts for Iraq starting in 2020.

"One year we have to deal with a drought, the next year we have floods. This is the climate extremism we see worldwide," said Kareem Hassan, manager of the massive Tharthar barrage north of Baghdad.

Despite Hassan's nod to climate change, his answer to how Iraq should respond was less reassuring: "It was God's will to bless us with rain this year, so we'll see what next year brings."

The apparent lack of planning is stark, considering Iraq's population of 40 million is projected to grow by another 10 million before 2030.

That will leave the country with a 37 percent deficit in its water supply, according to the Iraq Energy Institute.

That gap was already on Mahmud's mind as he looked at the fresh paint on Al-

Mashahada's UN-funded station.

"It's great now, for the 300 families here. But in three years, there will be double that number here," he said.



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Water crisis salts the earth in Iraq's long-neglected south
Iraq bans farming summer crops as water crisis grows dire

[Algeria army chief calls for 'dialogue' with protesters](#)

Author:

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ALGIERS: Algeria's army chief called Wednesday for dialogue between protesters and state institutions, a day after pushing back against

demonstrators' demands for top politicians to quit.

"I remain entirely convinced that adopting constructive dialogue with the institutions of the state, is the only way to exit from the crisis," General Ahmed Gaid Salah said in a statement published by the defense ministry.

This is "the wisest way to present constructive proposals, bring points of view closer and reach a consensus around the available solutions," he added.

Salah was for years an ardent supporter of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, until demanding on April 2 that impeachment proceedings be launched against the ailing leader – who stepped down the same day.

An interim president has been put in place and elections set for July 4, but protests which pushed Bouteflika from power have not abated.

On Wednesday hundreds of people rallied outside the General Workers' Union in the capital Algiers, marking May Day, where they clutched Algerians flags and shouted slogans against the "system."

Police prevented them from joining other protesters gathered outside the city's iconic post office, the focal point of demonstrations which began in February and have regularly drawn vast crowds.

Salah on Tuesday rebuffed calls by demonstrators for interim leader Abdelkader Bensalah, the former upper house speaker, and Prime Minister Noureddine Bedoui to step down.

In a speech, the army chief said the upcoming polls – which fall within the timeframe allowed by the constitution – amount to "the ideal solution to end the crisis."







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