

Palestinian election hopes rise after rivals agree on poll plan

Sat, 2021-01-02 21:03

AMMAN: Hopes that the first Palestinian polls in almost 15 years will be held soon have received a major boost with rival factions Hamas and Fatah exchanging written approval of a democratic election process.

The official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported that President Mahmoud Abbas received a written letter from Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas political bureau, conveyed to him by Jibril Rajoub, secretary of Fatah Central Committee.

Abbas welcomed the letter's contents "regarding ending the division, building partnership and achieving national unity through democratic elections, with full proportional representation – legislative and presidential elections, and the National Council – to be held simultaneously," Wafa said.

The Palestinian president asked Hanna Nassir, chairman of the Central Elections Commission, to meet with him to discuss the procedures that should be followed to issue the election decrees, the news agency said.

The exchange of letters between the rival factions is a major step forward for internal Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

Abbas thanked Egypt, which sponsors the intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks, as well as Qatar, Turkey, Russia and Jordan, for their goodwill efforts in reaching the agreement.

Speaking during Fatah's 56th anniversary, Rajoub told Al-Awdah TV that contacts have taken place with Egypt, Qatar and Turkey.

FASTFACT

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"We told them to keep us out of their internal problems and agendas. For the first time, Egypt says Fatah is not responsible for the continuation of the reconciliation. We have taken a number of steps to overcome the obstacles. Israel has been the head of the external factors that have wished for the reconciliation not to take place."

One issue that appears to have been resolved is Hamas' agreement to support the candidacy of Abbas for president, Rajoub said.

Nabil Shaath, a senior adviser to Abbas, told Arab News that Egypt has been

playing a positive role in bringing the sides together.

“Egypt has a national interest in Palestinian unity which will be helpful in ensuring security.”

Hamadeh Faraneh, a member of the Palestine National Council, said: “A presidential decree confirming the date for elections would be welcome so long as it comes as a result of a political will.”

Hamadeh Kamal, who runs a training program for released prisoners, said that he hopes that Haniyeh’s letter will reverse the repeated sense of disappointment and defeat among Gazans.

“Gazans don’t see any value in meetings and letters while they are hungry and in need. They are sick and tired of the status quo and the repeated failures to accomplish a breakthrough.”

Hani Almasri a Ramallah-based analyst and head of the Masar think tank, said that many obstacles have yet to be overcome. “This is a positive move, but many difficulties remain.”

Wael Manameh, a political analyst from Gaza, said that he hopes Haniyeh’s letter to Abbas shows that Hamas is totally committed to ending the split and holding elections.

“We need to take this opportunity to end the division. Our people have no more patience with the division that has hurt our cause and left the occupied areas in a deteriorating economic situation made worse by the pandemic.”





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Top diplomats from Jordan and Israel hold rare meeting on Palestine issue
Jordan urges Israel to stop undermining peace opportunities with Palestine

[Turkey's academic freedom under spotlight with new appointment](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-02 21:02

ANKARA: Academic freedom in Turkey was dealt a huge blow with a politically motivated appointment to one of the country's handful of independent universities, Bogazici University, which is more than 150 years old.

By presidential decree the current rector of the university was replaced on the first night of the year with a political figure who was a candidate standing for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) during the previous general and local elections.

The new rector, Melih Bulu, was a founding member of a district branch of the AKP. Over the past year, 27 rectors have been appointed by the president.

Bogazici University, overlooking the Bosphorus, was founded in 1863, the first American higher education institution to be established outside the US. It has more than 15,000 students and six campuses on the European side of Istanbul.

This latest appointment symbolizes the increased politicization of Turkish universities, along with an alarming trend of keeping the critical voices in media, civil society and academia under the control.

“President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has tightened his control over the higher education system in Turkey,” Berk Esen, a political scientist at Sabanci University in Istanbul, told Arab News.

As Erdogan has repeatedly stated that his party has not yet gained hegemony over education and culture, Esen thinks that such moves can be seen as deliberate attempts to change this situation.

He said Erdogan’s decision to appoint Melih Bulu as rector is especially worrisome for several reasons.

“Bogazici is one of the best universities in the country and employs some of Turkey’s most respected academics in various fields. In the past, President Erdogan refrained from appointing outsiders as rectors to prominent universities in the country,” he said.

“Our country needs free academia, free scientists and productive students. This freedom and productivity cannot be achieved by appointing trustees. We want a free academia,” tweeted Ali Babacan, the leader of breakaway DEVA party.

Students of the university, who are known for their high political awareness, protested under the Twitter hashtag #KayyumRektorIstemiyoruz (We don’t want a trustee rector).

In 2018, several anti-war students were arrested after a police raid in their houses and dormitories after they staged a peaceful demonstration in the university campus against Turkey’s military campaigns in Syria. They were criticized by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as being “communist, terrorist youth” in a public speech.

“It is impossible to have competitive universities on a global level and students who express themselves freely if you bring rectors to the universities in a top-down fashion. You cannot get success with such a mentality,” said Burak Dalgin, a founding member of DEVA who is also a graduate of Bogazici University.

Dalgin studied at Bogazici University in the mechanical engineering department between 1995 and 1999 before starting to work in the investment sector.

“Despite the shortcomings of Turkish democracy in the past, the school was still a safe haven for personal liberty,” he said.

Traditionally the candidate with the highest share of votes in the university elections became the rector of Bogazici University.

As the outgoing Bogazici rector is a professor at the university and briefly worked as vice-rector before taking on the top job, Esen said this recent move breaks with such precedent.

“Melih Bulu comes from outside the ranks of the Bogazici University and many have questioned whether he even has the academic credentials to work at Bogazici, let alone become rector. Also, his close connections to the AKP Istanbul branch will call into question his impartiality towards critics of the government among the academic staff and the student body,” he said.

According to Esen, this latest decision to appoint a political crony will further contribute to the culture of fear that has permeated the higher education system in Turkey and significantly harm academic freedoms.

“There is now widespread fear that universities will turn into sites for Erdogan to reward his party stalwarts,” he said.

Another presidential decree last year led to the closure of Sehir University, a private university in Istanbul linked to former prime minister and political rival Ahmet Davutoglu, making jobless all its academic staff, many of whom had taken a critical political stance over recent years.



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Turkey's crackdown on freedom of expression highlighted in new report Turkey's coronavirus death toll rises by 239, says health ministry

[Car bomb hits near Russian base in northeast Syria](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-02 00:46

BEIRUT: A car bomb detonated near a Russian military base in northeastern Syria on Friday in the first such militant attack in the area against the ally of Damascus, a war monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group reported several wounded in the attack after midnight in the Tal Saman area in Raqqa province, but did not give an exact figure.

There was no immediate Russian report of the incident, which occurred in a broader area controlled by Kurdish-led forces but where the Syrian regime and its ally Russia are also present.

A statement circulated on social media and attributed to the Hurras Al-Deen militant group claimed the attack.

The Observatory said two men parked an explosives-laden pickup truck outside the base and fled, in what was a rare such assault by Hurras Al-Deen in the area.

"It's the first such direct attack against a Russian base in northeastern Syria," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

Hurras Al-Deen has fighters in the country's last major rebel bastion in the northwestern region of Idlib, but very rarely operates outside that area.

Russia entered Syria's war in 2015, and its air force has backed Damascus regime forces in several deadly military campaigns against Idlib.

Russia has repeatedly accused rebels in Idlib of attacking its Khmeimim Air Base west of the opposition stronghold with drones, but car bomb attacks are much rarer.

Russian troops are stationed in northern Syria, including as part of several deals brokered with rebel backer Turkey.

A day earlier, Daesh claimed responsibility for an attack that killed nearly 40 soldiers in Syria the day before when militants ambushed a bus in eastern Syria.

The Observatory said Daesh had attacked regime soldiers as they traveled home for holidays in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, killing 37.

It said eight officers were among those killed while 12 other soldiers were wounded in the attack.

A statement by Daesh's propaganda arm Amaq said its fighters had "ambushed a bus transporting apostate Nusayri army elements," using a derogatory term for the Alawite sect to which Syria's Bashar Assad belongs.

HIGHLIGHT

There was no immediate Russian report of the incident, which occurred in a broader area controlled by Kurdish-led forces but where the Syrian regime and its ally Russia are also present.

The vehicle was targeted “with heavy weapons” and “multiple explosive devices, which led to destroying the bus and killing nearly 40 elements and wounding others,” added the statement, according to SITE Intelligence, which monitors jihadist activities worldwide.

It was one of the deadliest attacks since the fall of the Daesh (self-proclaimed) caliphate last year, the Observatory chief told AFP on Wednesday. Daesh overran large parts of Syria and Iraq and proclaimed a cross-border “caliphate” in 2014, before multiple offensives in the two countries led to its territorial defeat.

The group was overcome in Syria in March last year, but sleeper cells continue to launch attacks namely in the vast desert that stretches from the central province of Homs to Deir Ezzor and the border with Iraq.

The Observatory said two other buses which were part of the convoy managed to escape.

Syria’s war has killed more than 387,000 people and displaced millions from their homes since starting in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests, the Observatory says.

The dead include more than 130,500 pro-government fighters, among them foreigners, as well as 117,000 civilians.



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Syria's regime auctions off land of the displaced

[US, Gulf allies brace for Iran terror attacks as Tehran vows to avenge Soleimani killing](#)

Fri, 2021-01-01 22:13

JEDDAH: The US and its Gulf allies have been warned to prepare for Iran-led terror attacks after Tehran ramped up threats of revenge on the eve of the first anniversary of the killing of Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani.

With tensions between the US and Iran escalating in the region, Esmail Qaani, chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Soleimani's successor, on Thursday threatened to take revenge and kill US President Donald Trump and other officials.

Soleimani was killed in a US drone strike on Jan. 3 last year after his convoy was attacked outside Baghdad airport.

Amid a series of veiled threats from Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Friday accused the US president of making up excuses to attack Iran and warned that Washington "would pay for any possible adventure" in the region, while Iran's judiciary chief, Ebrahim Raisi, said that "not even Trump is immune from justice."

Commenting on the threats, Dr. Hamdan Al-Shehri, a political analyst and international relations scholar, said that an Iranian terror strike against the US or one of its allies in the Gulf or in Yemen is "highly possible."

However, he said that any attack would be limited due to US readiness to counter the Tehran regime.

Al-Shehri told Arab News that the US, more than any other global power, needed to step up its deterrent action to halt Iran's aggressive behavior.

The US has been suffering from Iranian terrorist actions since 1977, when its embassy in Tehran was taken over by an Iranian militia group, he said.

"The US silence for over 40 years has allowed Iran to grow, develop militias and terrorist cells, and even improve its relations with several countries, which are now supporting Tehran in carrying out terrorism and challenging the US."

He warned that US "lenience" would help Iran continue its threats to the region and the world, "especially on the nuclear level."

Al-Shehri said that Iran's threats are directed at its allies in the region and Iran's revolutionary media channels.

"If you ask me whose words we should take seriously, I would say Qaani's. He is Tehran's spearhead and the one who controls everything in the country."

He added that Qaani should be held accountable for his threats against the US president and for hinting at terrorist action inside the US.

US Central Command said on Wednesday that it had sent two B-52 bombers to the Middle East "to underscore the US commitment to regional security."

Two days earlier, a US Navy nuclear submarine passed through the Strait of Hormuz and entered the Arabian Gulf in the latest show of military strength from Washington.

Al-Shehri said: "If US forces don't take action today against Iran, they will never do so, especially with the change in the US administration and the current situation in the world."

He added: "It is now the perfect time to punish Iran for all its terror activities."

Al-Shehri said that Tehran is trying to put pressure on US decision-makers, especially the new administration.

"It wants to tell Joe Biden's administration that the best way to deal with Tehran is to placate it," the political analyst said.

"Biden is not likely to be another Obama, but he certainly will not be another Trump in confronting Tehran," Al-Shehri said.

Tensions between Washington and Tehran have been escalating since 2018, when Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed crippling sanctions.



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[Egyptian officials: Roadside bombing in Sinai kills 2 police](#)

Author:

By ASHRAF SWEILAM | AP

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Fri, 2021-01-01 17:59

EL-ARISH: A roadside bomb went off Friday in Egypt's northern Sinai Peninsula, killing two members of the country's security forces and wounding five, security and medical officials said.

According to the officials, the security forces were patrolling in the town of Bir Al-Abd when their armored vehicle was hit by a remotely-detonated bomb. The wounded were transferred to a military hospital in Sinai's coastal city of El-Arish. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the attacks with the media.

Friday's bombing was the second in the past three days. On Wednesday, one member of the security forces was killed and three were wounded in a roadside

bombing in a village near Rafah, a town on the border with the Gaza Strip. There was no clear claim of responsibility for Friday's attack, but Daesh posted a statement on Friday, saying it was behind Wednesday's bombing and three other recent attacks. The claims could not be independently verified. Egypt has been battling a Daesh-led insurgency in Sinai that intensified after the military overthrew Muhammad Mursi in 2013. The militants have carried out scores of attacks, mainly targeting security forces and minority Christians.

The conflict has largely taken place out of the public arena, with journalists and outside observers barred from the area. So far, the fighting has not expanded to the southern end of the peninsula, where popular Red Sea tourist resorts are located.

But in 2015, a Daesh bombing brought down over Sinai a Russian passenger plane that had departed from the resort Sharm el-Sheikh, killing all 224 people on board.

In February 2018, the Egyptian military launched a massive operation in Sinai and also in parts of the Nile Delta region and the desert along the country's western border with Libya. Since then, the pace of Daesh attacks has diminished.



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