

Erdogan 'trying to start a war in the Med'

Author:

AFP

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ANKARA: Turkey has extending research activities of its Oruc Reis seismic research vessel in the disputed waters of the eastern Mediterranean until Nov. 14.

The move is likely to re-ignite regional tensions after the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that hit Turkey and Greece last week, which was expected to lead to a period of earthquake diplomacy, as happened in 1999.

The new navigational alert (Navtex) issued by Turkey covers sea surveys 16 nautical miles off the Greek island of Rhodes and 50 nautical miles from the island of Kastellorizo.

The Greek Foreign Ministry condemned the Turkish move.

"This action creates further tension in a vulnerable region in which attention is now focused on the provision of assistance and on expressions of support and solidarity," it said in a press release.

"These actions show once again that Turkey is continuing to act in defiance of the appeals of the international community, including the conclusions of the October meeting of the European Council, which called on Turkey to cease these actions," it added.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias is to inform the country's allies and partners about the latest developments.

EU leaders agreed on Oct. 2 to give Turkey until early December to reconsider its moves in eastern Mediterranean before considering economic sanctions.

Evangelos D. Kokkinos, an Athens-based geopolitical expert, thinks Turkey issued its Navtex to take advantage Europe's inability to impose sanctions.

"Most European nations are expected to 'condemn' Turkish aggression, but sanctions are out of the question. So, Turkey extending its research activities in the region is another example of ignoring international law and Greek sovereignty," he told Arab News.

As to what regional tensions it might trigger, Kokkinos thinks that Turkey is already causing serious problems for most of its neighbors, but since both Greece and Turkey are NATO member countries, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's strategy is to provoke Athens into starting a military conflict, so that NATO supports Turkey.

"This is why the tension will remain in what seems like the Mediterranean Cold War," he said.

According to Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, "the renewal of a provocative Navtex is the latest crisis pushed by Ankara."

"It had already declared a Navtex in early October. Greece and European countries have condemned the use of these navigational notifications," he told Arab News.

Frantzman thinks that Turkey uses the Navtex as a way to challenge Greece at sea, which is an abuse of the concept of the Navtex.

"Turkey has done it numerous times in the past several months, shifting from one crisis to another each time. Now Turkey is moving on from having incited against France and Armenia to attacking Greece," he said, and added:

"It is made even more shameful by the recent earthquake where Greece and others had offered Turkey aid and Ankara's response is a naval provocation and threat."

The maritime dispute escalated in August when Turkey first sent its Oruc Reis vessel into waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus. Ankara then withdrew its drilling vessel last month to allow more room for diplomacy ahead of an Oct. 2 European Union summit, where Cyprus and Greece demanded for tough sanctions against Turkey.

Insisting on its rights in the energy-rich Mediterranean region, Turkey dispatched its vessel again on Oct. 12, inciting reaction from the international community. It sparked concerns about a potential military conflict between the two neighbors who argue over the extent of their continental shelves and claims about regional hydrocarbon resources.



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[Algeria referendum: A vote to halt protest movement](#)

Mon, 2020-11-02 00:59

ALGIERS: Polls opened in Algeria on Sunday for a vote on a revised constitution the regime hopes will neutralize a protest movement which at its peak last year swept long-time President Abdelaziz Bouteflika from power. Bouteflika's successor Abdelmadjid Tebboune, currently hospitalized overseas, has pitched the text as meeting the demands of the Hirak, a youth-led movement that staged vast weekly demonstrations for more than a year until the coronavirus pandemic stopped rallies. But despite a determined government media campaign for a resounding "yes" vote to usher in a "new Algeria," observers say the document offers little

new.

"Nothing has changed. The ultra-presidential regime will stay," said Massena's Cherbi, a constitutional expert at Sciences Po university in Paris. Tebboune has placed Sunday's referendum at the forefront of efforts to turn the page on the Hirak movement.

And after a campaign that saw the "yes" camp dominate state-backed media coverage and supporters of a "no" vote banned from holding meetings, few observers doubt that the text will pass. "I voted 'yes' so my country doesn't collapse," said Djillali Bouazza, a 78-year-old retiree. The key question is how many people will vote.

Tebboune said Saturday that Algerians will once again "have a rendezvous with history" to bring in a "new era capable of fulfilling the hopes of the nation and the aspirations of our people for a strong, modern and democratic state." The 74-year-old president is hospitalized in Germany amid reports of Covid-19 cases among his staff, and few details have been released on his condition. Seen by opponents as an old-school regime insider, Tebboune came to power following a December 2019 presidential poll marred by record abstentionism. The Hirak movement led calls for a boycott of that election, and even official data put the turnout at less than 40 percent.

Experts say the referendum is partly a bid by Tebboune for a more convincing validation at the ballot box.

HIGHLIGHT

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has pitched the revised constitution text as meeting the demands of the Hirak, a youth-led movement that staged vast weekly demonstrations for more than a year.

Rather than attacking the Hirak, Tebboune has ostensibly reached out to it, describing it as a "blessed, authentic popular movement" and arguing that the revised constitution meets its demands.

But despite his conciliatory language, many observers are skeptical, especially given how the document was written.

"The drafting and consultation process was highly controlled by the state," said Zaid Al-Ali, a senior adviser on constitution building at International Idea. "It's hard to argue that the Hirak's demands for a fully inclusive debate on the state's constitution was respected."

And while the new text lists purported guarantees of social and economic rights, Ali says these promises are hollow.

"The constitution's social and economic rights are not directly enforceable, which means that they are only aspirational," he said.

The Hirak, for its part, has rejected the document "in substance and form," calling it a "change of facade" and urging voters to boycott the poll.

Social media posts showed dozens of activists holding isolated demonstrations and ripping up campaign posters, particularly in the traditionally restive Kabylie region where local media reported that several booths were unable to open.

Algeria, with a population of 44 million and vast oil reserves, has been battered by low crude prices and the coronavirus pandemic, further hurting a

young population already suffering from spiralling unemployment. To limit the spread of Covid-19, authorities restricted entry to polling stations to three people at a time, made mask-wearing mandatory and had curtains removed from booths to prevent voters from touching them. While many have expressed apathy over Sunday's vote, government spokesman and Communications Minister Ammar Belhimer has predicted that people will "flock" to the polls "to lay a new stone in the process of nation-building and check the maneuvers of Algeria's enemies."

That rhetoric has been accompanied by a campaign of arrests against pro-Hirak activists, bloggers and journalists, with around 90 currently behind bars, according to the CNLD, a prisoners' support group. Prominent Algerian journalist Akram Belkaid said the regime wanted to prevent Hirak militants "from relaunching the movement in the street once the health situation improves."

"The repression currently underway also aims to prevent a large-scale boycott of the referendum," he wrote in a blog post. Polling stations opened at 8 a.m. and were set to close at 7 p.m.



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Algeria votes on new constitution amid opposition boycottSaudi's King Salman, Crown Prince send letters to COVID-positive Algerian president

Baghdad square reopens a year after mass protest closure

Author:

Sun, 2020-11-01 00:41

BAGHDAD: Iraqi authorities reopened Baghdad's Tahrir Square on Saturday, symbolically ending more than a year of demonstrations at the site, a focal point for the country's anti-government protest movement.

They also reopened the nearby Jumhuriyah bridge, which leads toward the heavily fortified Green Zone housing government buildings, parliament and foreign embassies. A hotspot of clashes during the protests, the bridge across the Tigris River witnessed fierce clashes between protesters and government forces last year as protesters tried to cross it. It has been sealed off to traffic since.

The reopening of the bridge and removal of tents in Tahrir Square appeared to put a formal end to a mass movement that had for a brief moment given many Iraqis hope for the future.

"The opening of Al-Jumhuriyah bridge and the removal of the tents from Tahrir Square was done in coordination with the protesters and there was no tension whatsoever," said Maj. Gen. Qais Al-Mohammadawi, the head of Baghdad Operations Command.

Protester tents have been dismantled at the Tahrir roundabout, now again circled by cars, and the towering concrete walls used to close off the Al-Jumhuriyah bridge across the Tigris River have been removed.

Security forces used bulldozers to help clear some of the protesters' tents in Tahrir Square. A few days before, thousands had rallied there to mark the anniversary of the mass demonstrations that swept the country against corruption by Iraq's entrenched political parties and its sectarian system.

FASTFACT

Tahrir Square and its massive Freedom Monument was at the heart of the movement that brought together hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in October 2019, paralysing the capital and southern Iraq for months.

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Clashes with security forces during the revolt left around 600 people dead and 30,000 wounded, the vast majority demonstrators.

"The reopening of these places does not mean the revolt is over," said Kamal Jabar, one of the figures of the movement dubbed the "October Revolution."

"The protesters have lost a battle, but the movement endures and is now working to set up political organizations," he told AFP.

The movement had called for jobs, basic services, a total overhaul of the

ruling class and an end to corruption.

But it lost momentum and then ground to a halt in the spring due to an outbreak of tensions between arch-foes the US and Iran on Iraqi soil and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The protests helped usher in Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi in May, but he has yet to deliver on any major reforms.

Lockdown measures imposed to stem the virus and the fall in oil prices precipitated Iraq's tumble into its worst economic downturn and doubled the country's poverty rate to 40 percent.

Amid the crisis, public pressure mounted to reopen Tahrir Square and Al-Jumhuriyah bridge to ease traffic in Baghdad – a city of 10 million inhabitants – and to revive trade in the center of the Arab world's second most populated capital.

Despite reaching unprecedented numbers in late 2019 and successfully mounting pressure on elites, the anti-government protests have been largely dormant in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Activists also blamed the drop in numbers on a violent crackdown by Iraqi security forces and militia groups, as well as kidnappings and targeted assassinations.



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Gas pipeline blast in southern Iraq kills 2, injures 51, police say Iraqi forces use water cannon, tear gas against protesters in Baghdad

Turkey picks up the pieces after devastating quake

Author:

Sat, 2020-10-31 23:20

ANKARA: Canan Gullu was having coffee with her friends on her balcony when the quake struck. The head of the Ankara-based Women Associations of Turkey, she had decided to spend the weekend in her summer house in the coastal town of Seferihisar after sleepless nights spent helping victims of domestic violence in the capital.

The teacups fell on the ground, and they hid under a table until they feel safer.

"I felt the building shaking, then the house began moving toward the house next door. It was as if the ground was moving back and forth under our feet. We could barely stand," Gullu told Arab News.

It was followed by a mini-tsunami that hit the district where she was living.

"I am now focusing on providing essential goods for the women living on the streets or whose buildings collapsed. It is the other face of poverty in Turkey," Gullu said.

The powerful quake that hit Turkey's western province of Izmir on Oct. 30 revealed the weak infrastructure of the country's building stock. Although the local residents are used to living with frequent tremors, the 7.0 magnitude quake on Friday evening was the biggest they had experienced; it was as powerful as the 1999 earthquake near Istanbul when more than 17,000 people died.

The search and rescue operations continued on Saturday, with touching footages showing a mother and her three children as well as a cat and a dog being rescued 18 hours after being trapped under the debris of their building.

Turkish survivors continue to stay outside in the tents provided by the municipality for fear of aftershocks. Some hotel and restaurant owners offered free rooms and free dinners to the traumatized people.

To prevent traffic blocking rescue efforts, the authorities have banned vehicles entering the city center.

Friday's quake killed more than 30 people in Turkey and the neighbouring Greek islands, although that figure was expected to rise. Almost 900 people were injured, with 243 under treatment and eight in intensive care, officials said.

Despite their diplomatic row over energy drilling operations in the waters of the eastern Mediterranean, Turkish and Greek officials exchanged solidarity

messages on Twitter.

“Whatever our differences, these are times when our people need to stand together,” Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweeted.

Many people were still waiting for news of relatives trapped under the debris.

Izmir is crossed by 17 different fault lines and has been prone to frequent tremors in the past. The quake resilience of the buildings in the city and unplanned urbanization have come under the spotlight, sparking criticism of the authorities.

The Turkish government issued a controversial zoning amnesty ahead of the general elections of 2018, resulting in 10 million illegally constructed buildings throughout the country.

These were eligible for legitimate deeds, with disastrous consequences during the quakes. Izmir tops the list for the number of illegal buildings that were “forgiven” by a government move to garner more votes.

Several buildings that benefited from that amnesty have collapsed over the years, killing dozens of people. Estimates say that one-fifth of the buildings in Istanbul could be completely destroyed in a quake with a magnitude of 7 or above.

In a past interview, Turkey’s famous contractor Ali Agaoglu, who was proud of selling massive residences to Arab clients, confessed that his company used sand from the Marmara Sea during their construction work. “If there is an earthquake in Istanbul, (the number of the dead and collapsed buildings will be so high that) the army won’t even be able to enter the city,” he said.

Turkey’s earthquake tax was also the subject of intense debate earlier this year with the quakes in eastern provinces of Elazig and Malatya, after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: “We spent it where it was meant to be spent. And after this, we do not have time to provide accountability for matters like this.”

Special taxes were levied in Turkey after the 1999 earthquake and were later made permanent. However, there is widespread skepticism about whether these taxes were spent on quake resilience or whether they only helped the state budget at that time.



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Death toll reaches 37 in quake that hit Turkey, Greek island 22 dead, buildings collapse as major quake hits Turkey, Greece

[British-Iranian national Zaghari-Ratcliffe details first prison interrogation](#)

Sat, 2020-10-31 19:09

LONDON: Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian dual national imprisoned in Iran on contested charges of espionage, has given an account of her first interrogation in 2016.

She said she was threatened with her daughter being taken away, and her interrogators claimed her husband was a spy and gave her false information regarding her release.

Her account of her first 40 days in custody appears in "White Torture," a recently published book of interviews with women imprisoned in Iran on political charges compiled by Narges Mohammadi, who is in prison for her human rights work.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe told Mohammadi that she spent the first 40 days in total isolation. In her early imprisonment, Zaghari-Ratcliffe said she endured days without sleep, panic attacks, fainting, and regular attempts by her interrogators to force a confession of espionage.

READ MORE: [British FM: Zaghari-Ratcliffe imprisonment will 'sabotage' UK-Iran ties](#)

She told the author that the ordeal was so distressing that she came to "doubt herself" and question whether the accusations were real.

"They tried to induce me to say something that didn't exist. They said they had top-secret evidence that I worked for the (British) parliament and against Iran," she said.

"I was sure that was not the case, but they repeated it so much that I doubted myself when I returned to the cell. I spent long hours in my cell wondering if the projects I had worked on had anything to do with Iran. Then I told myself that I was 100% sure that my projects had nothing to do with

Iran, but after each interrogation I would review these cases over and over again," she added.

"The interrogators threatened to send Gabriella (her daughter) to London if I did not cooperate. They kept telling me that I had lost my job and that if interrogation took too long my husband would leave me. They asked me to tell them about my friends and their work projects. I had not really slept for three weeks. I had not seen my child and I was under a lot of pressure."

After her initial arrest and interrogation, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was sent to the notorious Ervin Prison.

She said after she was transferred there, she was allowed to meet her family, but she hardly recognized her daughter.

During the visitations, she said she struggled when her daughter asked her to go to her parents' house.

"Every time she (Gabriella) cried goodbye I would break down," she said. "The interrogators were present in the meeting room. When saying goodbye, I wanted to go ahead and tie her shoes for her, but they wouldn't let me and I had to leave her."

Zaghari-Ratcliffe is set to return to court on Monday in Tehran. If she is returned to prison, as she expects, she will once again be separated from her husband and daughter.



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