

Three dead as forest fires burn in Syria, Lebanon

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Sat, 2020-10-10 18:17

DAMASCUS: Forest fires in Syria and neighboring Lebanon have killed three people and burned swathes of land since Thursday, state media and officials said.

Syrian state television on Saturday morning broadcast scenes from the affected areas, where firefighters were working to extinguish the blazes. It said hundreds of hectares had burned in the countryside of Syria's coastal Latakia and Tartus provinces, and in the central Homs province.

The health ministry said three people had died in Latakia province since Friday as a result of the fires, and that 70 people were taken to hospital suffering breathing difficulties.

Dozens of fires were burning, including "45 in Latakia and 33 in Tartus," Syria's Agriculture Minister Mohammed Hassan Qatana told a radio station late Friday.

The Latakia fire brigade said they were "facing the largest series of fires seen in Latakia province in years."

Official news agency SANA said fire burned homes in Baniyas, in Tartus province.

In neighboring Lebanon, there have been more than 100 fires across the country since Thursday, according to George Abu Musa, head of operations for the country's civil defense.

"The situation is crazy, there are fires everywhere," Abu Musa told AFP.

"We have mobilized 80 percent of our personnel and almost all our centers in Lebanon," he said.

He said most of the blazes had been extinguished but some were still burning in the mountainous Chouf region in the south, and in Akkar in the north.

Military helicopters were assisting firefighters in "hard-to-reach" areas, he added.

Abu Musa was unable to identify the cause of the blazes, but said wind and high temperatures were helping them spread.

On Friday, authorities reported several fires across northern and central Israel and the occupied West Bank as temperatures soared, forcing thousands to evacuate.

Dozens of fires hit Lebanon in mid-October last year, amid unusually high temperatures and strong winds.

The government faced heavy criticism and accusations of ill-preparedness over its response to the 2019 blazes.

Days after Lebanon's 2019 fires, mass protests broke out, triggered by proposed tax hikes but quickly transforming into months-long demonstrations against the ruling class, deemed by protesters as inept and corrupt.





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[Crackdown on Turkey's pro-Kurdish party raises concerns among opposition](#)

Fri, 2020-10-09 22:36

ANKARA: The latest crackdown on Turkey's pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has raised concerns about the government's underlying motives and the risk posed to opposition parties.

Four members of the HDP – including Sevin Alaca, the co-mayor of the eastern province of Kars – were arrested on Oct. 8 in relation to protests in 2014, bringing the number of recent arrests over the incident to 16.

Those arrested are accused of encouraging anti-government protests in

southeastern provinces in October 2014 in reaction to the Daesh siege of Syria's mainly Kurdish border town of Kobane. Demonstrators allegedly claimed that the Turkish government failed to protect Kobane against Daesh.

Some view the recent arrests as an attempt by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to weaken the HDP, which gained 13 percent of the votes in the last general elections.

Talking to Halk TV on Oct. 7, HDP's co-chairman Mithat Sancar claimed that the political cost to the government of shutting down the HDP would be too great, but that it is trying to ensure the party cannot function properly.

"The Constitutional Court has been under more and more pressure in recent days and it is being threatened," he said. "Thus, we would not be surprised by the closure of the HDP. But the government does not want to take this path for now because this would have a political cost and would trigger reactions from both global and domestic spheres. That is why the government can adopt a less costly method by making the party a de facto ineffective one."

Berk Esen, a political analyst from Sabanci University in Istanbul, told Arab News there are several reasons why the government would not simply close down the HDP, the main one being that it does not want to create a precedent for party bans, which have hurt the Islamist movement in the past. In 2008, the AKP was on trial and threatened with closure, and its leaders have always promised to oppose banning political parties.

Banning a party would likely incur a severe backlash against the Turkish government from the European Union, Esen added. A committee from Sweden's Left Party, including its chairman, paid a visit to the HDP headquarters in Ankara on Oct. 6 and expressed concerns about the silencing of the HDP, which they considered "a big loss" for the country.

"Keeping the HDP open but severely weakened allows the government to retain the image of a democratic regime in Turkey, even though the political system no longer satisfies even the minimal democratic requirements," Esen said.

Esen added that the HDP also serves as a rallying point for the alliance of the ruling party and its partner, the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and helps to keep ultra-nationalist voters behind President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's administration.

"Moreover, the government does not need to close down the party to limit its operations. It has already appointed caretaker administrators to most HDP-controlled municipalities and arrested hundreds of party officials, including its former leader," he said.

In the 2019 local elections, the HDP – Turkey's third-largest party – won 65 municipalities throughout the country, but only six of its 65 mayors remain in office, with the rest removed under terror-related charges and their positions taken up by government-appointed bureaucrats.

"The HDP has taken a huge hit from the government's crackdown and faces enormous organizational challenges in the months ahead. At this point, its

resistance remains primarily at the ballot box, where its loyal voters continue to support it," Esen said.

For Sinem Adar, an associate at the Center for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) in the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, the latest crackdown on the HDP matches a general trend that has been apparent since Turkey's June 2015 elections: A systematic attack on Kurdish political representation by Erdogan's party and the MHP.

"This trend has included a variety of methods, such as the removal of parliamentary immunity from Kurdish MPs, their criminalization and systematic exclusion from political processes, and – last but not least – the replacement of elected mayors by government-appointed trustees," she told Arab News.

"Nationalist factions within the security apparatus became a part of this trend after the failed coup attempt in 2016. In light of the developments in Northern Syria, with Turkish military interventions, the ruling class is determined to suppress Kurdish political representation and participation," she continued.

There are widespread concerns among other opposition parties, too, that what happened to the HDP might also happen to them.

"We need to stand up against all injustices, regardless of which party, who is experiencing them," Hasan Subasi, a lawmaker from IYI (Good) Party said on Oct. 6 during a televised speech, adding that a Turkish parliament without the HDP would not represent Turkey and would be "anti-democratic."

According to Adar, violating the political rights of the members of the HDP is a tactic that the government has been using to drive a wedge between the HDP and the opposition parties, particularly the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). "After all, the March 2019 elections have clearly shown that the Kurds have become king-makers," she said.

Adar said the crackdown could also be part of the government's divide-and-conquer tactics when it comes to the CHP itself.

"The CHP is known to include various factions that might not necessarily agree with one another on how the Kurdish question should be addressed. The systematic suppression of the HDP can also be a means to (stoke) existing differences within the CHP," she said.



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[Iranian diplomat warned of retaliation over Belgian bomb plot trial](#)

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Fri, 2020-10-09 23:03

PARIS: An Iranian diplomat charged in Belgium with planning to bomb a meeting of an exiled Iranian opposition group in France warned authorities of possible retaliation by unidentified groups if he is found guilty, according to a police document.

Belgian prosecutors charged Vienna-based Assadollah Assadi in Oct. 2018 and three others with planning an attack that year on a rally of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) attended by high profile former US, European and Arab officials.

Assadi, who goes on trial on Nov. 27, was the third counsellor at Iran's embassy in Vienna. French officials have said he was in charge of intelligence in southern Europe and was acting on orders from Tehran. He is one of the first Iranian diplomats to face trial on terrorism charges in the European Union.

Tehran has repeatedly dismissed the charges against Assadi, calling them a "false flag" operation by the NCRI's political arm, the MEK, (Mujahedin-e Khalq), which presents itself as an alternative to Iran's theocracy. Assadi has not commented on the charges and his lawyer has declined to comment on them.

Minutes of a March 12 meeting between Assadi and Belgian police, seen by Reuters and confirmed as authentic by his lawyer, show the diplomat initially set out Tehran's long-standing grievances with the MEK's activities in the past.

He then warned Belgian authorities that his case was being closely watched by undisclosed groups in Iran and neighbouring countries.

"According to ASSADI Assadollah we (Belgium) do not realize what is going to happen, in the event of an unfavourable verdict," the minutes, taken by the Belgian police, say.

Assadi told police that armed groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria, as well as in Iran, were interested in the outcome of his case and would be "watching from the sidelines to see if Belgium would support them or not", according to the minutes.

He declined to answer when asked by police if any kind of organization was involved.

Asked about Assadi's comments, a spokesman for the Belgian federal prosecutor said: "Such threats can occur, but we always take the necessary security measures." The spokesman declined to comment further or say whether intelligence services had been informed of Assadi's statement.

Assadi said he was making the statement at his own behest and had not discussed it beforehand with the Iranian embassy, according to the record of his 31-minute encounter with police. The embassy could not immediately be reached for comment.

Assadollah's lawyer, Dimitri de Beco, denied his client was making threats. "It is absolutely not a threat of retaliation and if it's understood that way it's a misinterpretation," he told Reuters. "He will explain the sense of his remarks to the court."

Tehran accuses European states of harbouring the MEK, which it deems a terrorist organisation. The group had been based in the Iraqi capital Baghdad under former president Saddam Hussein and was on the U.S. State Department's terror list from 1997 to 2012 when it was taken off it renounced violence. A co-ordinated intelligence operation between French, German and Belgian services thwarted the planned attack in the days prior to the NCRI rally, in which the keynote speech was given by U.S. President Donald Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani.

Assadi was arrested while on holiday in Germany and handed over to Belgium, where two of his suspected accomplices had been arrested with 500 grams (one lb) of TATP, an explosive, as well as a detonation device.

France said Iran's intelligence ministry was behind the plot and expelled an Iranian diplomat, while the European Union froze the assets of an Iranian intelligence unit and two of its staff.



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Two years after failed bomb plot, Iranian opposition rallies backers
onlineSuspects in plot to bomb Iranian opposition rally in France to be sent
to Belgium

[Seizure of ancient seed collection in Turkey sign of 'hyper-nationalist' atmosphere under Erdogan](#)

Fri, 2020-10-09 23:01

LONDON: A large collection of seeds held by the British Institute at Ankara have been seized by Turkish authorities, according to reports.

Specimens of ancient and modern seeds were taken by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which claimed the collections "belonged to Turkey," [The Times newspaper reported.](#)

The seizure was revealed by the institute's Chairman Stephen Mitchell in a

letter to board members leaked to Middle Eastern [news website Al-Monitor](#). The seeds were donated to the institute by Gordon Hillman, a well-known and pioneering UK archaeobotanist who passed away in 2018. Mitchell said Turkish officials took “108 boxes of archaeobotanical specimens and four cupboards comprising the modern seed reference collections” to the headquarters of government-run museums in Ankara, and requests for more time to minimize damage were refused. The collection was the work of Hillman, who worked for the UCL Institute of Archaeology, and comprises seeds and botanical specimens from ancient sites from across the region that date back thousands of years. There are also modern specimens in the collection, which is used by experts as a reference tool. The Turkish authorities have “removed this research resource from the wider Turkish and international community of researchers. It was a nice, small research facility, open to anyone who wanted to use it. Now it’s all gone,” said Dorian Fuller, an archaeobotanist at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. It is not the first time the Turkish government has been criticized for over-zealous action with regard to the country’s cultural and historical sites. Earlier this year, the former Byzantine cathedral Hagia Sophia was reopened as a mosque after many years functioning as a museum. Analysts say the seed seizure is another example of the “hyper-nationalist atmosphere” prevalent under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. “For over a decade now Turkish nationalists have been mulling over a ‘seed conspiracy’ – based on the idea that ‘Israeli seeds’ are pushed upon Turkish farmers in order for them to produce tomatoes, onions or eggplants of a lesser quality, with no smell or taste but bright colours,” Asli Aydintasbas, a senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told The Times. “The theory has now expanded to cover a vast western conspiracy to deprive Turkey of seeds – and is now apparently shared by Erdogan, who has reinvented himself as a super-nationalist. This has more to do with the hyper-nationalist atmosphere in Turkey today than anything else.”



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[Libya capital's mosques open after 7-month virus closure](#)

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1602270068741992800

Fri, 2020-10-09 18:57

TRIPOLI: Mosques reopened in and around the Libyan capital Friday almost seven months after they were ordered to close as part of strict curbs to rein in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Libya, ravaged by a complex web of conflicts since the ouster of longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in a 2011 uprising, has seen a surge in contaminations since its first coronavirus case in March.

According to the latest official figures, there have been more than 41,000 confirmed cases of the virus and 621 deaths in Libya, a country of less than seven million people.

The Government of National Accord (GNA) based in the capital Tripoli authorized the reopening of mosques, but with conditions.

Mosques in Tripoli and nearby towns reopened for prayers, with the faithful wearing face masks and observing social distancing.

They also brought their own prayer mats.

The imam of Jaafar bin Abi Talib mosque in the western suburb of Janzour told AFP an "awareness" campaign was launched ahead of the reopening.

"We distributed leaflets explaining the conditions under which prayers can resume in the mosques in line with the government's guidelines," Abdel Monem Al-Rayani said.

The guidelines restrict numbers in mosques for prayers to half pre-coronavirus levels, he said.

Mosques which fail to comply with government restrictions would be shut.

The closure of mosques was ordered nationwide when the first cases of coronavirus emerged in mid-March, although in some towns and districts the ban was ignored.

The call to prayers still rang out but with the faithful urged to "pray at home."





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