

# Struggling Morocco oasis risks becoming mirage

Author:

Sat, 2020-02-15 00:43

SKOURA, MOROCCO: Dead palm trees lie on dry, yellowish earth near an abandoned adobe house in Morocco's arid southeast, as drought threatens ancient oases.

"I grew up in this oasis and I have seen it shrink," says 53-year-old Mohamed El-Houkari, who lives in Skoura, a rural oasis area of around 40 sq. km. For centuries, Morocco's oases have been home to human settlements, agriculture, and important architectural and cultural heritage, thanks also to trans-Saharan trade caravan routes.

Long a buffer against desertification, they have gone through cycles of drought in recent decades and are now "threatened with extinction," Greenpeace has warned, due to the impact of high temperatures. In most of the Skoura oasis, the ground is dry and cracked.

Until the 1980s, "pomegranate and apple trees flourished here," says Houkari, who is also part of a local development NGO. Now, only hardy olive trees grow in the shadow of the palms.

The Skoura region used to attract farmers. These days, most young people work elsewhere, though some stay for the developing tourism sector.

"I am ready to sell my land, but there is nobody to buy it. Everyone has left," says Ahmed, a farmer.

The man in his 50s settled in Skoura with his family 25 years ago, "when the area was green and there was plenty of water. But the drought has destroyed everything."

Electrician Abdeljalil spends most of his time between the cities of Marrakesh and Agadir.

"Our life isn't here anymore," the 37-year-old says. He observes that the use of electric pumps and has contributed to the overexploitation of the groundwater.

Residents say they now need to dig down over 40 meters to find water, compared to seven to 10 meters in the 1980s.

Houkari laments the abandonment of traditional methods – like the "khatarat" canal irrigation system – that allowed water to be distributed "economically and rationally." Using the pumps is also costly, Ahmed, the farmer complains. Morocco's high level of water stress does not just affect life in the oases. In 2017, protests were held in the semi-desert southern town of Zagora against repeated water cuts.

This year, the kingdom launched an almost \$12 billion national program for the supply of potable and irrigation water through to 2027.

Under a separate initiative, "we set ourselves the goal of mobilizing 1 billion cubic meters of water by the end of 2020," says Brahim Hafidi, director-general of the national agency for the development of oasis zones (ANDZOA), referring to efforts to build dams and rehabilitate irrigation canals.

## FASTFACT

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According to Greenpeace, droughts have increased in frequency in Tunisia, Morocco, Syria and Algeria over the past decades, rising from once every five years to once every two years in Morocco.

"Oases rely on subterranean waters, which generally come from snow," notes Lahcen El-Maimouni, a local academic, who says global warming has hurt the oases.

The Atlas mountains, visible on the horizon from Skoura, are capped in white. But the snow is not enough to sustain the dry beds of the wadis that cross the oasis, and the effects of drought are visible along the rugged road that leads to Skoura.

To rehabilitate oasis areas, ANDZOA has planted 3 million trees, the agency's director-general says.

Morocco has lost two-thirds of its 14 million palms over the last century, according to official figures.

But for Skoura resident Houkari, saving the oases also requires raising awareness of the risk of desertification.

Palm trees have even been removed and sold to villa owners, he adds with regret.

"The danger of the oases disappearing is very real," he says, in front of a dry irrigation canal.



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## [Pompeo calls for action after Iran's arms for Houthis seized](#)

Sat, 2020-02-15 00:18

AL-MUKALLA: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has demanded action against the Tehran regime after the US Navy seized an Iranian weapons shipment bound for Houthi rebels in Yemen.

A US Navy warship seized weapons believed to be of Iranian "design and manufacture," including 150 anti-tank guided missiles and three Iranian surface-to-air missiles, the American military has said.

The military said the guided-missile cruiser Normandy boarded a dhow, a traditional sailing vessel, in the Arabian Sea on Sunday.

"The weapons seized include 150 'Dehlavieh' anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM), which are Iranian-manufactured copies of Russian Kornet ATGMs," the statement said.

"Other weapons components seized aboard the dhow were of Iranian design and manufacture and included three Iranian surface-to-air missiles," it said.

The military said that the weapons seized on Sunday were "identical" to those seized by another US warship in November.

Pompeo wrote on Twitter: "The US Navy interdicted 358 Iranian-made missiles + other weapons components on their way to the Houthis in Yemen. This is another example of the world's largest state sponsor of terror the Islamic Republic of Iran continuing to defy the UN Security Council," Pompeo wrote on Twitter.

"The world must reject Iran's violence and act now to renew the expiring UN arms embargo on Iran," Pompeo said.

The weapons are currently in US custody, and partner nations have been invited to inspect the cache.

"Those weapons were determined to be of Iranian origin and assessed to be destined for the Houthis in Yemen, which would be in violation of a UN Security Council Resolution that prohibits the direct or indirect supply, sale, or transfer of weapons to the Houthis," CENTCOM said.

Yemen's government has demanded the international community impose tougher sanctions on the Iranian regime over the arms shipment.

Yemen's Minister of Information, Mummar Al-Aryani, said that Iranian arms shipments to Houthi fighters have greatly contributed to the destabilization of the country and the deaths of hundreds of Yemenis.

"We welcome the announcement by the US Central Command that the US navy seized an Iranian arms ship on its way to Houthi militia," Al-Aryani said via Twitter on Thursday.

The minister called on the international community to impose more sanctions on Iran and pressure the country to stop shipping arms to the rebels.

Houthi militia have used Iranian arms to expand military operations and kill civilians, he added.

"We urge the international community and the UN Security Council to impose deterrent sanctions on the Tehran regime and exert pressure to (halt) arms and exports smuggling to Houthis," he said.

Yemen's latest accusations come shortly after the US announced that it had seized a suspected Iranian weapons shipment in the Arabian Sea en route to Houthi fighters in Yemen.

Even before the current conflict started in late 2014, consecutive Yemeni governments accused Iran of giving military, financial and technical support to the rebels, helping them to seize control of the entire country in early 2015.

Iran stepped up its arms shipments to the Houthis after 2015 when the Saudi-led coalition intervened militarily in Yemen to restore the power of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Arms shipments have been intercepted at sea or while crossing government-controlled areas on land.

Backed by massive military aid from the Saudi-led coalition, Yemeni government forces have seized control of key seaports on the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea that are thought to be entry points for arms smuggling.

The coalition has strengthened Yemeni coast guard forces and equipped them with fast boats to combat smuggling of arms and drugs.

Last week the coast guard authority in Yemen's eastern Mahra governorate took delivery of several armed boats from the Saudi-led coalition. Mahra Gov. Rajeh Bakreet said the boats will help the coast guard in the fight against smuggling.

Separately, the Houthis have dropped a threat to impose a tax on aid, in a significant step toward resolving a crisis that has jeopardized the world's biggest humanitarian operation.

UN leaders and aid groups held crunch talks in Brussels on Thursday to consider scaling back or suspending the delivery of vital supplies to



millions of people at risk of starvation.

### **Houthi leaders killed**

Iran-backed Houthi rebels have arranged several funeral processions for military officers killed in fighting with government forces or in strikes by Saudi-led coalition warplanes.

Last week, the Houthi version of the official Saba news agency said the rebel group was mourning the deaths of Col. Abdul Latef Saleh, Col. Maeen Abdullah, Col. Abdul Badae Al-Houthi and several other commanders killed in fighting.

More than 100 Houthis fighters, including senior field commanders, are believed have died since early last month when fighting intensified following a Houthi drone and missile attack that killed more than 110 soldiers and civilians in Marib.





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## [Is Turkey mulling a counterattack in Idlib?](#)

Sat, 2020-02-15 00:30

ANKARA: As Turkey is poised to send additional troops to Syria's rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib, there is speculation of a large-scale war if the deadline given to Damascus to withdraw its forces by the end of the month is ignored.

Turkey's military continued on Friday to move armored vehicles and bulldozers to Idlib. This has angered Russia, which recently said the crisis in the province is being worsened by the inflow of weapons from Turkey. Any military operation by Ankara would aim to push Syrian regime forces back. The possibility of this has led to a nadir in Turkish-Russian relations not

seen since 2016.

Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, said Turkey's preference is to use the regime's offensive as an excuse to exercise more control over Idlib and get rebel groups there to be more dependent on Ankara for support.

"Turkey benefits from US support in Idlib, but isn't interested in the US prodding it into an offensive," he told Arab News.

"A conflict puts at risk too much for Ankara, such as its S-400 (missile system) deal (with Moscow), TurkStream (a natural gas pipeline running from Russia to Turkey) and Libya operations."

So far, no deal has been reached between Turkey and the US regarding Idlib, following days-long meetings in Ankara.

Turkey backs some rebel groups, which it has used against Kurdish forces in Syria over the last two years.

Frantzman said Ankara wants to cement control of the provinces of Afrin and Tel Abyad, which it seized from Kurdish forces, as part of a deal with Russia that sees fewer refugees fleeing to Turkey from Idlib, which is home to 3 million civilians.

## **FASTFACTS**

- **Any military operation by Ankara would aim to push Syrian regime forces back.**
- **No deal has been reached yet between Turkey and the US over Idlib.**
- **Importance of Idlib needs to be understood in light of Turkey's agenda.**

Ankara recently gave Damascus an ultimatum to withdraw from seized territory in Idlib by the end of this month or face military action.

In the span of one week, 13 Turkish soldiers were killed by shelling from forces loyal to Damascus. There are 10 Turkish observation posts entirely surrounded by regime forces.

"The consolidation of Russian and Iranian power in Syria threatens Turkey's positions in, and its goals for, northern Syria," Prof. Michael Tanchum, senior associate fellow at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, told Arab News.

"The importance of Idlib must also be understood in light of Turkey's agenda for the region of northern Syria along Turkey's border."

He said any further refugee influx into Turkey would be detrimental to the country's economy and the popularity of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party.

"Thus, making a defiant stand against Russia in Idlib wouldn't harm the ruling party's support in Turkey and serves the AK Party's needs," Tanchum added.

But he said the question is one of calibration: "Can Turkey raise the cost to Russia to bring Moscow back to the table, or will escalation simply impel Russia to forcefully seek an endgame in Syria without concern for its impact on Russia-Turkey relations? If the former possibility exists, it will be a



very narrow window of opportunity.”



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Turkish-backed rebels down Syrian helicopter in Idlib

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## [Yemen Army foils Houthi attempt to take over Taiz](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-14 01:39

AL-MUKALLA: Dozens of Houthi militants have been killed in Yemen's southern city of Taiz as the Iran-backed militias push to break army's lines of defenses and to reimpose their siege on the city, an army spokesperson told Arab News on Wednesday.

Col. Abdul Basit Al-Baher said attacks on government forces on all fronts around the city had escalated in an attempt to make a major breakthrough.

"The national army has foiled all attempts to make gains," Al-Baher said,



adding that loyalist forces had also shelled a Houthi training camp in the west of the city.

The city of Taiz has seen the bloodiest battles between government forces and the militias since early 2015, when the rebels moved a large number of forces from Sanaa to bring the city under their control.

Despite their numerical advantage, the Houthis failed to push into the city's downtown area, limiting them to the outskirts where they imposed a siege that brought Taiz to the edge of starvation.

## **FASTFACT**

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Government forces have managed to recapture the western edge of the city and reopened a strategic road that linked the city with the southern port of Aden, which enabled the government to funnel vital humanitarian and military supplies to the city's inhabitants.

Al-Baher said the Houthis had launched simultaneous attacks on the edges of the city for the first time in months.

"Their recent attacks have focused on all fronts around the city," he said, adding that at least 59 Houthis and nine loyalists were killed in the latest clashes. Al-Baher also said that if the Houthis successfully laid siege again, it would put the lives of tens of thousands of people at risk.

In the southern province of Abyan, a government soldier was killed and several others injured when missiles fired by militiamen exploded inside their military base in the district of Lawder on Tuesday, local media said.

Fighting was also reported in the northern province of Jawf, where government forces attacked Houthi positions under air cover from the Saudi-led coalition.

## **Hospitals attacked**

Local health authorities in the province of Marib have said that three health facilities, out of the region's 12, had been completely destroyed by Houthi shelling over the last five years.

The remaining nine facilities had all been damaged by fighting, and seven health workers had been killed in different districts in Marib, according to the provincial office of the Ministry of Health.

Houthi missile and mortar fire has killed hundreds of civilians and soldiers in Marib over the last several months.



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US ship in Arabian Sea seizes suspected Iranian weapons, likely on their way to Houthis in Yemen  
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## [Egyptian delegation seeks to defuse tensions in Gaza](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-14 01:36

GAZA CITY: Since US President Donald Trump announced his Israel-Palestine peace plan on Jan. 28 – which he referred to as the “Deal of the Century” – tension in the Gaza Strip has escalated rapidly, with the Gazan side firing rockets and releasing incendiary balloons across the border, and Israel shelling Gaza by night.

Over the past few days, Israel has escalated its threats against factions in Gaza, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Neftali Bennett warning Hamas that Israel would launch a full military

assault unless the rockets and balloons sent from Gaza stopped.

Many observers believe that Hamas is seeking to pressure Netanyahu – who is preparing for elections early next month – into easing the siege imposed on Gaza 13 years ago. At the moment, that tactic does not appear to be working, however.

At the beginning of this month, Israel stopped the entry of cement into Gaza, reduced the number of permits available to Palestinian merchants to enter the West Bank and Israel, and shrunk Gaza's fishing zone from 15 nautical miles to 10.

In an attempt to prevent further escalation of the situation – potentially into a fourth Intifada – an Egyptian security delegation, headed by the director of the Palestinian Department in Egyptian Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Ahmed Abdel Khaliq, visited the enclave on Monday to meet with Hamas and major Palestinian forces.

A Palestinian leader who participated in the meeting told Arab News, on condition of anonymity, that the delegation carried several "Israeli messages," the main one being the threat of a broad military operation unless the rockets and balloons stopped.

In return, the source said, the delegation pledged that it would pressure Israel to follow up cease-fire conditions agreed with Hamas earlier – through Egyptian mediation – to ease the blockade, allow some goods to enter Gaza, increase the availability of fuel for the power station, and widen the fishing zone.

Talal Abu Zarifa, a member of the Political Bureau of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, told Arab News, "The resistance factions were the ones who passed a message via the Egyptian delegation stipulating the necessity to lift the siege on Gaza and stop all forms of aggression against our people in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Jerusalem, and that more aggression will push the region to escalate."

Since the Egyptian visit, there has been a marked decrease in the number of balloons and rockets fired from Gaza into Israel, although it has not stopped completely.

Abu Zarifa said that Egypt is "aware of the suffering" of 2 million Palestinians in Gaza, and is keen not to see the situation deteriorate.

Rami Abu Zubaydah, a military-affairs researcher, said, "(Israel) makes various threats regarding the launch of a broad military operation against Gaza. The intervention of the Egyptian mediator may contribute to containing the situation a little, especially since the factions and the occupation do not want to enter into a comprehensive confrontation now, if it is possible to reach an agreement ending the siege of Gaza, realizing that Netanyahu cannot implement any comprehensive agreement in light of the upcoming elections."

Likewise, Tayseer Mohaisen, a professor of political science at Al-Azhar

University in Gaza, said he did not believe the situation in Gaza would develop into all-out war, despite growing Israeli threats, because Israeli politicians are focused on the upcoming elections, and would not sanction any unpredictable military action at the moment.

Mohaisen added that he views the rocket and balloon launches from Gaza as “a limited wave of escalation aimed at demonstrating public protest against Israel’s failure to comply with the ceasefire understandings, and forcing Israel to ease the blockade.

“The Israeli army is targeting empty fields and sites in Gaza (while attempting to fool) the Israeli public into thinking they have targeted the infrastructure of Hamas,” Mohaisen told Arab News. “This means (Israel) does not want to break its security relationship with Hamas, as any war will hinder the achievement of its strategic goals.”

Commentators expect that the Egyptian security delegation will succeed in its mission, and that Israel will retract its recent measures and introduce further measures to ease the blockade.



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