

Iranian politician compares Khamenei to Shah Reza

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 21:58

DUBAI: A long-detained opposition leader in Iran on Saturday compared a bloody crackdown on those protesting government-set gasoline prices rising under its supreme leader to soldiers of the shah gunning down demonstrators in an event that led to the Islamic revolution.

The comments published by a foreign website represent some of the harshest yet attributed to Mir Hossein Mousavi, a 77-year-old politician whose own disputed election loss in 2009 led to the widespread Green Movement protests that security forces also put down.

Mousavi's remarks not only compare Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the toppled monarch whom Khamenei to this day refers to as a tyrant. It also suggests the opposition leader views the demonstrations that began Nov. 15 and the crackdown that followed as a potentially similar last-straw moment for Iran's Shiite theocracy as the 1978 killings represented for the shah.

"It shows people's frustration with the country's situation. It has a complete resemblance to the brutal killing of people on the bloody date Sept. 8, 1978," Mousavi said, according to the statement published by the Kaleme website long associated with him. "The assassins of the year of 1978 were representatives of a non-religious regime, but the agents and shooters in November 2019 were representatives of a religious government."

There was no immediate response from Iranian officials nor state media, which has been barred from showing Mousavi's image for years.

The protests that struck some 100 cities and towns across Iran beginning Nov. 15 came after Iran raised minimum gasoline prices by 50 percent. The subsidy cuts, which the government said would help fund cash handouts to the poor, come as Iran's economy suffers under crushing US sanctions following President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, remain under house arrest in their home near Khamenei's official residence in Tehran.

However, the Kaleme website occasionally publishes statements from Mousavi, who earlier served as Iran's prime minister before the position was eliminated in 1989.

Iranians immediately began demonstrating and protests quickly turned violent, seeing gas stations and banks attacked. Online videos purport to show Iranian security forces shooting at demonstrators.

The scale of the gasoline price demonstrations remains unclear even today as Iran so far has not offered nationwide statistics for the number of people arrested, injured or killed in the protests. Amnesty International believes the protests and the security crackdown killed at least 161 people.

One Iranian lawmaker said he thought that over 7,000 people had been arrested, though Iran's top prosecutor disputed the figure without offering his own. The country's interior minister said as many as 200,000 people took part in the demonstrations. Iran blocked access to the wider Internet for a week, further shielding its response from the world's view.

The statement Saturday saw Mousavi compare November's crackdown to "Black Friday," a seminal moment in Iran's revolution. That September day in 1978, soldiers opened fire on demonstrators in Jaleh Square.

How many the shooting killed remains in dispute today, with figures running anywhere from 86 to 4,000. However, historians mark the day as the point of no return for the fatally ill shah. Mass protests and strikes followed. The shah fled Iran in January 1979 and by the next month, the revolution took hold.

In his statement, Mousavi offered his condolences to those slain in the November crackdown and warned "this wound on the nation's body and soul" would not heal until there are public trials of their killers.

"The bullying and talking about how we are in the middle of a world war are not a convincing answer for the people and it would not heal the people's wounds," Mousavi said, referring to tensions with the US "It would be enough that the system just think about the consequences of the Jaleh Square assassinations."

Mousavi is not the only one to compare the November crackdown to the time of the shah, however. Days earlier, lawmaker Mohammad Golmoradi at the Iranian parliament got pulled away after some news websites reported he criticized President Hassan Rouhani over the crackdown.

Golmoradi's area, Mahshar in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province, saw security forces violently put down protests, activists say.

"What did you do that the shah didn't?" Golmoradi reportedly asked.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Hossein Mousavi](#)

[Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#)

[Mohammad Reza Pahlavi](#)

Iran 'deliberately' suppressing death, arrest tolls: Rights group
Violent protests grip major Iranian cities over gas price rise

[Relic from Jesus' manger arrives at Bethlehem new home](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 21:49

BETHLEHEM, WEST BANK: A tiny wooden relic believed to have been part of Jesus' manger has returned to its permanent home in the biblical city of Bethlehem 1,400 years after it was sent to Rome as a gift to the pope.

Sheathed in an ornate case, cheerful crowds greeted the relic on Saturday with much fanfare before it entered the Franciscan Church of St. Catherine next to the Church of the Nativity, the West Bank holy site where tradition says Jesus was born.

The return of the relic by the Vatican coincides with Advent, a four-week period leading up to Christmas.

The Palestinians welcomed the relic as a spirit-lifting occasion as Bethlehem braced for Christmas, where pilgrims from around the world flock to the city in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The wood piece, just a few centimeters long, was once kept in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. It was handed over earlier this week to the custodian of the Bethlehem church, who said it brought "great honor to believers and pilgrims in the area."

The provenance of ancient relics is often questionable. Still, they are revered by the Christian faithful, among them the coachloads of pilgrims who squeeze through a narrow sandstone entrance in the Church of the Nativity to visit the birth grotto that is its centerpiece.

According to the Custos of the Holy Land for the Catholic church, Francesco Patton, the relic dates back more than 2,000 years and was sent to the Vatican in the 7th century.

Encased in a silver-colored ornamental table-top stand, the relic was unveiled to the public on Friday at the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, before it was taken to Bethlehem on Saturday.

A procession of marching bands greeted the relic as it arrived in Bethlehem. It was placed in Saint Catherine's Church, at the Church of the Nativity compound in Manger Square.

"We are proud that part of the manger is back in Bethlehem because we feel that the soul of God is with us more than before," said Chris Gacaman, 53, a Bethlehem homemaker, as she stood outside the church.

Others were a little let down.

"It's a small piece, we thought it would be a bigger piece," said Sandy Shahin Hijazeen, 32. "When we heard that the manger is coming back we thought it would be the whole manger, but then we saw it."

Bethlehem, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, is usually particularly busy ahead of Christmas on Dec. 25, with tourists and pilgrims flocking to the Biblical city. Christians make up around 1 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Bethlehem](#)

[Jesus](#)

[West Bank](#)

Bethlehem church extends hours amid pilgrim surge
Christmas is about keeping hope alive, says Bethlehem mayor

[Air pollution forces Iran to shut schools and universities](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 21:42

TEHRAN: Air pollution forced the closure of schools and universities in parts of Iran on Saturday, including Tehran, which was cloaked by a cloud of toxic smog, state media reported.

The decision to shut schools and universities in the capital was announced late Friday by Deputy Governor Mohammad Taghizadeh, after a meeting of an

emergency committee for air pollution.

“Due to increased air pollution, kindergartens, preschools and schools, universities and higher education institutes of Tehran province will be closed,” he said, quoted by state news agency IRNA.

An odd-even traffic scheme was imposed to restrict the number of private vehicles on roads of the capital city and trucks were banned outright in Tehran province, IRNA reported.

The young and elderly and people with respiratory illnesses were warned to stay indoors and sporting activities were suspended on Saturday, the start of the working week in the Islamic republic.

Schools were also closed on Saturday in the northern province of Alborz and in the central province of Esfahan, IRNA reported, citing officials.

Other areas where schools were shut included the northeastern city of Mashhad, Orumiyeh city in northwestern Iran and Qom, south of Tehran.

In Tehran, average concentrations of hazardous airborne particles reached 146 micrograms per cubic meter on Saturday, according to air.tehran.ir, a government-linked website.

The pall of pollution has shrouded the sprawling city of 8 million for days and is only expected to dissipate on Monday when rain is forecast.

Air pollution was the cause of nearly 30,000 deaths per year in Iranian cities, state media reported earlier this year, citing a health ministry official.

The problem worsens in Tehran during winter, when a lack of wind and the cold air traps hazardous smog over the city for days on end – a phenomenon known as thermal inversion.

Most of the city’s pollution is caused by heavy-duty vehicles, motorbikes, refineries and power plants, according to a World Bank report released last year.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iran](#)

[Air pollution](#)

[Tehran](#)

Iran protests point to turmoil in the futureIran disputes 'exaggerated' protest death tolls

[Turkey 'may stall NATO defense plan over Syria dispute'](#)

Fri, 2019-11-29 02:01

ANKARA: Ankara is reportedly blocking the approval of a NATO defense plan for the alliance's eastern flank until it gets the green light over its security concerns in Syria.

Ahead of NATO's 70th anniversary summit in London next week, Turkey has allegedly asked for more political support in its fight against the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia in northern Syria in return for backing NATO's latest defense plan for the Baltics and Poland, according to a Reuters report.

Turkey's NATO envoy has reportedly been instructed to stall the plan until the alliance formally recognizes the YPG as terrorists. Ankara considers YPG

an offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – listed by the US, EU and Turkey as a terror group.

The military plan, aimed at defending Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland against aggression from Russia, can only be approved unanimously by all 29 member states. Turkey's strategic location on the eastern flank of the alliance makes its approval even more critical because of its proximity to the Middle East and Russia.

According to NATO's founding treaty, an attack against one ally is considered an attack against all, and will trigger the alliance's military strategies for collective defense.

Karol Wasilewski, an analyst at the Warsaw-based Polish Institute of International Affairs, said that the move is unlikely to make Central European countries sympathetic toward Turkey.

"Secondly, this may be interpreted as a another sign that Turkey is unwilling to contribute to the deterrence policy against Russia and it wants to remain neutral, yet the stakes are located in a different sphere – Turkey wants to get help when it comes to the safe zone in Syria," he told Arab News.

"Turkey will be less and less trusted in NATO and might be seen as Russia's Trojan horse within the alliance," Wasilewski said.

The latest move is seen as a tactic by the Turkish side to break its international isolation on its cross-border military operation into Syria. But it is unclear whether this will pay off or whether this is a new sign of division within NATO if no compromise is reached.

FASTFACT

The latest move is seen as a tactic by the Turkish side to break its international isolation on its cross-border military operation into Syria.

The alliance is going through a difficult period. NATO has been the focal point of criticism by US President Donald Trump due to the allies' spending on defense, while French President Emmanuel Macron recently argued that the alliance was experiencing "brain death."

According to Wasilewski, the matter is highly problematic in Poland since up till now Polish decision-makers could argue that Turkey had done nothing that ran counter to Polish interests. The two countries have diplomatic relations dating back more than 600 years.

"And now it wouldn't stick anymore," he said, adding that in Europe this will most probably be seen as Turkey's endeavor to transfer domestic problems to NATO.

For Madalina Sisu Vicari, an expert on geopolitics and Turkey, if the report

is true then by holding up the upgraded plan of defense for Poland and the Baltic states, Turkey is attempting to build leverage that could enable it to achieve two objectives. The first is noninterference in its Syrian military operation from other NATO members, especially from those who have criticized it (France, Germany); the second is legitimization of the operation as Ankara seeks to obtain NATO's acknowledgement of the YPG as "terrorists."

"Whether Ankara will achieve both objectives, and to what extent, is hard to say now, but nevertheless it may get minimization of the public criticism expressed so far by some NATO members, especially European ones, who are mostly concerned and affected by the Syrian operation," she told Arab News.

Macron, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson are expected to meet on the sidelines of the NATO summit next week to discuss the latest developments in Syria.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Turkey](#)

[NATO](#)

[Syria](#)

Is NATO's 'collective defense' still solid? Macron's words raise doubts
NATO allies clash after Macron says alliance experiencing 'brain death'

France warns Turkey over Syria military action ahead of talks with European leaders

Author:

Fri, 2019-11-29 01:57

MENEKSE TOKYAY ANKARA: French President Emmanuel Macron on Thursday issued a stern warning to Turkey over its military action in Syria ahead of a crunch meeting on the issue with European leaders next week.

Speaking prior to talks between Turkey, Germany, France and the UK, due to take place on the sidelines of the Dec. 3-4 NATO summit, Macron said: "Turkey cannot expect solidarity from NATO allies and at the same time launch an offensive in Syria."

Macron's comment came during a press conference with NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg in Paris and follows his claim earlier this month that the alliance was experiencing "brain death" over its ability to ensure collective defense.

It also comes in the wake of Turkey's reported willingness to offer its support for NATO's defense plan for the Baltics and Poland on condition of the organization's formal recognition of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia as a terror group.

At a time of high tensions in the NATO alliance over Turkey's offensive in Syria last month, the four-way meeting in London will bring Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Macron around the table.

Turkey's military incursion into northeastern Syria, the return of Syrian refugees, the establishment of a planned 30-km-deep safe zone and the subsequent political process, are subjects expected to rank high on the agenda for discussion.

Marc Pierini, the EU's former ambassador to Syria and Turkey and currently a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe, said that Ankara's recent initiatives in Syria and its stated position over rebels and refugees had run counter to European stances and interests.

HIGHLIGHT

At a time of high tensions in the NATO alliance, the four-way meeting in London will bring leaders from Turkey, Germany, France and the UK around the table.

"The meeting in London will be one opportunity to clarify positions. But the issue is bigger than just three EU countries," he told Arab News.

During an interview with the French magazine Paris Match on Thursday, Syrian President Bashar Assad said that the presence of French forces in Syria was an occupation, and he called on the French government to respect international law.

"The support provided to terrorists is still continued by Turkey, the US, Britain and France," Assad said.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the Ankara office director of think tank the German Marshall Fund of the US, said that despite stark differences on certain issues, Turkey and Europe still needed to work together on key matters such as migration and the return of foreign fighters.

"The quadripartite platform will be an opportunity to voice mutual concerns but also renew their commitment to cooperate on these issues. As a general rule, talking is better than not talking, particularly for allies with mutual interests but diverging views," he added.

Last month, Erdogan accused Western governments, especially NATO and the EU, of "siding with terrorists" over their NATO ally.

Although the Turkish incursion into Syria was paused with two separate cease-fires with Moscow and Washington, Ankara has warned it would resume its operation if the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia did not entirely withdraw from the agreed zone along Turkish border.

In the meantime, Turkey will deport 11 Daesh suspects to France in early December as part of a 2014 agreement between the two countries. Accordingly, French nationals who are arrested by Turkish authorities are deported back to France in coordination with French authorities.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Turkey](#)

[France](#)

Libya's eastern parliament condemns deal with Turkey
CAATSA sanctions against Turkey: Is the genie out of the bottle?