

Report: Over 120 Syrian churches damaged by war since 2011

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BEIRUT: A Syrian war monitor associated with the opposition said Monday that over 120 Christian places of worship have been damaged or destroyed by all sides in the country's eight-year conflict.

Some of the attacks were deliberate, such as the Daesh group using bulldozers to destroy the ancient Saint Elia Monastery in Homs province in 2015. The majority, however, were caused by front-line combat, shelling or rockets. Christians made up about 10 percent of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million, who co-existed with the Muslim majority and enjoyed freedom of worship under President Bashar Assad's government.

Most have left for Europe over the past 20 years, with their flight significantly gathering speed since the start of the current conflict.

Around half of all Syrians are now either internally displaced or have left the country.

The report by the Qatar-based Syrian Network for Human Rights, which collects statistics on the war, said government forces were responsible for 60% of the 124 documented attacks since fighting erupted in March 2011. The rest were blamed on Daesh militants, the Al-Qaeda-linked group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other factions of the armed opposition.

There was immediate comment from the government, which rarely comments on reports from foreign organizations.

"Targeting Christian places of worship is a form of intimidation against and displacement of the Christian minority in Syria," said Fadel Abdul Ghany, the founder and chairman of SNHR.

The report said Daesh was behind 10 attacks on Christian sites, five of which were in the northern city of Raqqa, once the extremists de-facto capital. The group was known for displacing and killing Christians in areas it controlled and confiscating their properties.

Hardest hit was the northern province of Aleppo, with 34 attacks, 24 by rebels and six by the government.

The highest number of attacks by government forces – 27 out of 29 – was in the central province of Homs.

SNHR's report also placed blame on Syrian government allies Russia and Iran, but did not specify how many of the attacks they'd caused.



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[Israel exposes fresh secret Iranian nuclear site](#)

Mon, 2019-09-09 18:46

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday that Iran had been developing nuclear weapons at a secret site near the city of Abadeh, but that Tehran destroyed the facility after learning it had been exposed.

It was the first time Netanyahu had identified the site, which, he said, was discovered in a trove of Iranian documents Israel previously obtained and disclosed last year.

“In this site, Iran conducted experiments to develop nuclear weapons,” Netanyahu said in broadcast remarks, showing an aerial picture of several small buildings, including their coordinates, that he said were taken at the Abadeh facility late in June 2019.

“When Iran realized that we uncovered the site, here’s what they did,” he said, showing a picture from a month later in which the buildings no longer appeared. “They destroyed the site. They just wiped it out.”

Netanyahu's comments followed a Reuters report revealing that the International Atomic Energy Agency found traces of uranium at a different site in Iran that the Israeli leader had first pointed to during a speech last year at the United Nations.

Iran had yet to explain the traces of uranium at that site, though it denies ever having sought a nuclear weapon.

Netanyahu, who strongly opposed a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, made the remarks in a televised speech about a week before a general election in Israel in which he is in a tight race to win another term.

"I call on the international community to wake up, to realize that Iran is systematically lying," Netanyahu said. "The only way to stop Iran's march to the bomb, and its aggression in the region, is pressure, pressure and more pressure."

However, Iran rejected Netanyahu's claims saying he was seeking a "pretext for war."

"The possessor of real nukes cries wolf," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in a tweet, making reference to Israel's own presumed nuclear arsenal.



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IAEA found uranium traces at Iran 'atomic warehouse' Netanyahu: Israel discovered second atomic storage facility in Iran

Israeli PM's bid to place cameras at polling stations fails

Author:

By ARON HELLER | AP

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Mon, 2019-09-09 13:13

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed on Monday in his eleventh hour bid to legislate that cameras be installed in polling stations to prevent what his supporters claim is voting fraud in Arab districts. After a stormy session, a parliamentary committee voted it down before it reached the plenum with Netanyahu's backers deadlocked with his opponents. The deciding, dissenting vote was cast by a representative of former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, an ally-turned-rival of Netanyahu who forced Israel's unprecedented second election of the year and is poised to be the kingmaker again in the vote.

With just a week to go to the repeat election, Netanyahu had sought to pass the controversial legislation amid a scorched earth campaign in which he's accused his opponents of conspiring to "steal" the election.

Netanyahu responded to the setback by slamming the opposition.

"There is no reason for those who really care about the integrity of the election to object to the camera law, which prevents forgeries," he said in a video message to his followers. "There is only one answer to this: Turn out in masses at the ballot box."

Netanyahu insists the proposal was a matter of transparency, but it drew renewed accusations that he was promoting racism and incitement against the country's Arab minority. Critics also said he was preemptively claiming to be a victim of electoral fraud as an alibi, in case he loses.

Mordechai Kremnitzer, a constitutional law expert, wrote in the Haaretz daily that the bill amounted to pointing a "gun at Israeli democracy's head."

With his career on the line, Netanyahu has increasingly been embracing some tactics of President Donald Trump. Netanyahu routinely lashes out at the media, the judiciary, the police and his political opponents, claiming there is a conspiracy of "elites" to oust him.

In a Facebook video Sunday, Netanyahu hinted that Arab forgery prevented him from winning the April vote. Netanyahu's hard-line Likud Party had sent out campaign workers on election day to videotape Arab voters entering polling stations, claiming they were preventing fraud.

A Likud-linked PR agency that spearheaded the campaign later boasted it had

helped suppress Arab turnout, while Arab leaders accused Likud of trying to intimidate voters. Israel's Central Election Commission banned the practice this time around and the fast-tracked legislation was supposed to override that ruling.

Adalah, a legal rights group for Arab minority rights, said even without passing the proposed bill it "has already caused harm by injecting bald-faced lies into the public political discourse under the premise of preserving the 'purity of elections.'"

Stifling Netanyahu once again was his nemesis Lieberman, who said any monitoring should be operated by election officials and not "Netanyahu's private militia."

Lieberman, who was once Netanyahu's chief of staff and a staunch partner, has emerged as his chief rival and critic. He passed up the post of defense minister in Netanyahu's government following April's election, claiming the new coalition would give excessive influence to ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties. The dispute left the prime minister without a parliamentary majority and forced the Sept. 17 do-over vote.

Opinion polls show Likud in a neck-and-neck race with the main challenger, the centrist Blue and White party, with neither side able to secure an outright majority without the support of Lieberman's party. Lieberman is pressing for a unity government between the two parties, but Netanyahu claims the real goal is to oust him from office.



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Toll of Morocco flood-hit bus rises to 17 dead

Author:

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Mon, 2019-09-09 11:46

RABAT: At least 17 people were killed in Morocco when flood waters overturned their bus in the kingdom's southeast, authorities said Monday in a revised toll.

Rescuers have been searching for bodies since the accident Sunday, when the bus flipped on a bridge in a valley near the city of Errachidia, authorities said.

They said a further 29 passengers, with various injuries but in "stable" condition, had been transferred to a hospital in Errachidia.

Rescuers were continuing their search.

Morocco has been hit by violent storms this summer, sparking flash flooding in its mountainous interior.

At the end of August, a flood hit a football pitch killing eight people in the southern region of Taroudant.

And in July, 15 people were killed in a landslide caused by flash floods on a road south of Marrakesh.

Floods are common in the North African country. In 2014, they killed around 50 people and caused considerable damage.



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Morocco puts brakes on migrant flow as Spain and EU pay out
Eighth body found after Morocco football match flood

[Israeli PM's former protege could now bring his downfall](#)

Author:

By ARON HELLER | AP

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Mon, 2019-09-09 09:32

JERUSALEM: Avigdor Lieberman entered Israeli politics as a loyal protégé of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Now, the maverick politician could be the one to topple his former mentor.

Lieberman, a burly, tough-talking immigrant from the former Soviet Union, forced Israel's unprecedented second election of the year and is poised to be the kingmaker again.

Polls suggest Netanyahu won't be able to form a coalition government without Lieberman's support.

Lieberman has played hard to get.

"I don't have to join at any cost," he told Channel 12 news over the weekend.

"The prime minister's policy is simply submission to terrorism."

For years, Netanyahu and Lieberman have had a roller-coaster relationship.

Lieberman, once Netanyahu's chief of staff, has held a series of senior Cabinet posts and was often a staunch partner. But he's also been a rival, critic and thorn in Netanyahu's side.

In a high-stakes gamble, he passed up the post of defense minister in Netanyahu's government following April's election, leaving the prime minister without a parliamentary majority and forcing the Sept. 17 do-over vote.

Their dispute, over what Lieberman says is excessive influence of ultra-Orthodox religious parties, has become a central issue in the current campaign.

Lieberman says he will insist on a secular unity government between Netanyahu and his main challenger, Benny Gantz, in order to push out ultra-Orthodox parties. But Netanyahu says his former ally's real goal is to oust him from office, and Lieberman is suddenly discovering newfound support from those who hope he does just that.

"He is the only one who actually stood up to Netanyahu and didn't bend over," said Eli Avidar, a lawmaker from Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party.

"Lieberman has known Netanyahu for 31 years. He knows the good and the bad and every angle you can imagine."

The crisis that led to this month's election ostensibly revolved around Lieberman's insistence that young ultra-Orthodox men be drafted into the military, like most other Jewish males. But beneath the surface is a decades-long strained relationship between the two men.

The Moldovan-born Lieberman started as a top Netanyahu aide in the 1990s before embarking on a political career of his own. But he resigned last year because Netanyahu kept blocking his plans to strike hard against Gaza militants.

"When I look at the Gaza Strip it's unbelievable. The Hamas chiefs know they have immunity from Netanyahu," Lieberman said Saturday.

Lieberman is often accused of racism for branding Arab lawmakers as enemies of the state and advocating for population swaps that would place many Arab citizens outside Israel's borders. But he's also shown signs of pragmatism, such as suggesting he'd be willing to dismantle his own West Bank settlement if Israel's final borders were redrawn.

Lieberman's secular agenda has made him a favorite of Israel's business sector, and his iconoclastic persona and straight talk – delivered in a slow, Russian-accented monotone – made him an unlikely savior for people tired of Netanyahu's corruption-tainted, decade-long grip on power. That's despite the fact that Lieberman survived a lengthy corruption scandal himself that exposed his links to shady characters and that allegedly earned his daughter mysterious millions.

"Oddly, the man who was a symbol for the secretive and conspiratorial politician, who runs his party undemocratically, is the hope of Israeli

democracy and society," communications expert Baruch Leshem wrote in a column in the Ynet website.

An irate Netanyahu has made it his mission to destroy Lieberman politically, taking aim in ads and campaigning furiously among his core base of Russian-speaking supporters. He's branded him a "leftist" and a "serial toppler" of right-wing governments.

"Whoever wants a leftist government should vote for Lieberman," he said during a recent visit to Ukraine, which critics say he used to target Lieberman's traditional backers.

But the all-out assault has yet to make a dent. Polls show support for Lieberman's party has doubled since it came precariously close to elimination in April's vote.

An emboldened Lieberman recently met with top members of Netanyahu's Likud party, reportedly discussing the chances of replacing the prime minister if he fails to muster a parliamentary majority. That fear seems to have propelled Netanyahu to demand a "loyalty oath" from party members, which Lieberman compared to practices of a North Korean leader.

Unlike Gantz, Lieberman hasn't officially ruled out forming a government with Netanyahu again, saying a broad coalition is needed to tackle urgent security challenges and lessen a deficit – which he blames on extortion by smaller religious parties. But he's done nothing to dispel suggestions that he too wants Netanyahu gone.

"He's a strategist, he knows how to play politics better than anyone," said Ashley Perry, a former adviser.

Former officials affiliated with the center-left have been showing up at his campaign events. Lieberman has been warmly welcomed in bastions of liberal Tel Aviv – until recently an unimaginable scene.

Avidar, the lawmaker from Lieberman's party, said a firm stance against Netanyahu on religious affairs has boosted the party's wider appeal among secular voters who tend to vote more liberal, but said it remains firmly on the right when it comes to security and negotiations with the Palestinians. "We are getting a lot of sympathy because people see that we are the only party stopping a Halachic state," he said, referring to one governed by Jewish law.

Still, the prospect of Lieberman's newfound crossover appeal is unnerving to those who have tangled with him before.

"Lieberman may have decided that the Netanyahu era is over and that he will be the one to give the final twist of the knife. That would be a fitting end to a Shakespeare play, but what we've got here is an Israeli tragedy," wrote Zahava Galon, a former leader of the dovish Meretz party.

"Lieberman was and remains one of the shadiest and contemptible individuals in Israeli politics, and his belated legitimization only goes to show just how low we have sunk."



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Rockets fired toward Israel from Syria, but fall shortIsraeli PM's office airbrushes Netanyahu's 'Yeltsin' gaffe