

[Daesh holdouts in Syria battle 'gone by tonight:' Trump](#)

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WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump said Wednesday that the Daesh's last bastion in Syria will be "gone" by the end of the day.

He showed off maps that illustrate the dramatic shrinking of territory held by the militant group in the period from his election in 2016 and now.

In one map shown by Trump to reporters in Washington and then again at a rally to factory workers in Lima, Ohio, Daesh territory marked in red extends over large areas. A second map, he said, shows the militant organization about to be wiped out.

"There is no red. In fact, there's actually a tiny spot which will be gone by tonight," he said.

Fighting continued in Baghouz, Syria, on Wednesday, but the Daesh militants are down to a tiny scrap of land, where they are surrounded and under heavy fire from a US-led coalition of Kurds, Syrians and others.



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Daesh fighters pinned on Syrian riverbank, warplanes fly above

[Turkey's economic woes lift opposition hopes](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-03-20 22:36

ANKARA: As Turkey's March 31 local elections draw closer, economic issues are becoming a major priority for the country's voters.

While the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has based its electoral success on the country's prosperity for almost two decades, declining living standards and an economic downturn may signal a shift to rival parties in the election.

Turkey was once an attractive option for investors trying to reach out to emerging markets, but the country's economic outlook has changed significantly in recent years with double-digit inflation and a currency growing weaker by the day.

Analysts say the economic concerns of middle-class voters, whose purchasing power has been primarily hit, will determine the electoral outcome if they turn against the AKP.

In the previous local elections, the AKP won 43 percent of the vote, while its nearest rival, the Republican People's Party (CHP), polled below 25 percent.

Growing tensions between Turkey and the US are expected to further erode the value of the Turkish lira in the coming months.

To reduce the impact of economic hardships on impoverished voters, Turkey's government recently opened market stalls selling cheap produce. Long queues are a common sight at the stalls.

Voter frustration may translate into the loss of some big cities, including the capital Ankara and Istanbul, where the AKP has ruled for decades. Istanbul has added significance for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who began his political career as mayor of the city. Former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim is running for election in the city against his secular rival Ekrem Imamoglu.

A recent poll by the opposition CHP in 29 provinces found that about 60 percent of voters are frustrated over the country's economic decline.

Burhanettin Bulut, a CHP parliamentarian, said Turkish voters' top priority will be "their empty cooking pot in the kitchen."

"Parents cannot give pocket money to their children when sending them to the school. From early morning until night, their main concern is how to feed themselves. Nobody is happy about this trend," he told Arab News.

Berk Esen, an international relations professor at Ankara's Bilkent University, believes the poor economic outlook will make the election results in some cities, such as Ankara and the northwestern industrial hub Bursa, much tighter than in previous polls.

"Although AKP voters will not split with their parties in a single stroke, some may opt not to vote to show their frustration. Voter turnout will be important in these elections when even 1 percent of votes can determine a candidate's success," he said.

Some analysts said the alliance between the AKP and the nationalistic MHP party could offset the votes lost due to the economic outlook.

But Esen said that in some cities where MHP candidates were not nominated, nationalistic constituencies may choose not to vote or to vote for opposition parties.

The use of "religion" card by the government following the New Zealand terror attack is also seen as a strategy to divert attention from its economic failures.

According to this view, voters in Turkey will not change loyalties because of ideological commitment.

"If we focus on 30 metropolitan provinces where the majority of voters live, the number of battlefront elections is about 12," Dr. Emre Erdogan, founder and director of the independent Infakto Research Workshop in Istanbul, told Arab News.

"The CHP is guaranteed two provinces in the west, including Izmir, and the pro-Kurdish HDP can already list three provinces in the southeast. It seems that the AKP will gain 13 provinces hosting 10 million voters. The remaining provinces where 25 million voters live are accepted as competitive," he said.

Erdogan said that declining economic conditions might lead to eight of these provinces, including the southern provinces of Antalya and Mersin, as well as the northwestern province of Balikesir, voting for opposition parties.

"In Ankara and Istanbul, the two biggest cities, the victory of the opposition will depend on third parties – Kurdish and nationalists votes," he said.

The HDP, with electoral support of about 10 percent, did not nominate candidates for Istanbul and Ankara, and is supporting opposition candidates.



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Turkey's ruling AKP submits constitutional reform package to parliament
Turkey opposition chief hosts 'justice congress' in challenge to Erdogan

[Nile crisis must be resolved to avoid conflict: Think tank](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-03-20 21:16

CAIRO: A water crisis brewing between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over a contentious Nile dam could escalate into a conflict with "severe humanitarian consequences", a think-tank said on Wednesday.

Egypt, which relies almost totally on the Nile for irrigation and drinking water, fears the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam being built on the Blue Nile

could reduce its water supplies.

Talks on the issues have been deadlocked for months.

“The case for cooperation among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan in resolving the Nile water dispute is unambiguous,” the International Crisis Group think-tank said.

“All stand to benefit. Dangers of failing to work together are just as stark. “The parties could blunder into conflict, with severe humanitarian consequences,” it warned.

The dam project launched by Ethiopia in 2012 is designed to feed a hydroelectric project to produce 6,000 megawatts of power, equal to six nuclear-powered plants.

Egypt depends on the Nile for about 90 percent of its needs for irrigation and drinking water, and says it has “historic rights” to the river guaranteed by treaties from 1929 and 1959.

The river, which runs through 10 countries, is Africa’s longest and a crucial artery for water supplies and electricity for all the countries.

The Blue Nile takes its source in Ethiopia and converges with the White Nile in Sudan’s capital Khartoum to form the Nile which runs through Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea.

The ICG said it was “crucial that the parties resolve their dispute before the dam (whose construction is near completion) begins operating.”

“The Nile basin countries could be drawn into conflict because the stakes are so high: Ethiopia sees the hydroelectric dam as a defining national development project; Sudan covets the cheap electricity and expanded agricultural production that it promises; and Egypt perceives the possible loss of water as an existential threat,” it said.

The report recommends a two-step approach, beginning with confidence building measures “by agreeing upon terms for filling the dam’s reservoirs that do not harm downstream countries” and “a new, transboundary framework for resource sharing to avert future conflicts”.



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Young Egyptians trudge through mud to clean up Nile
Egypt FM warn Ethiopia over Nile River dam

[Gaza border protests provide artist with inspiration, and raw materials](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-03-19 22:36

GAZA: One year on from the start of Gaza's border protests, the weekly clashes with Israeli soldiers have become part of the texture of life in the Palestinian enclave, providing inspiration and even raw materials for local artists.

Diorama artist Majdi Abu Taqeya spends hours creating three-dimensional miniature replicas of the protest scenes, with figures carved from remnants of Israeli ammunition collected from the landscape along the frontier.

Wool and cotton are turned into the white and black smoke that swirls over the five protest camps that have been set up along the fortified frontier since the protests began on March 30, 2018.

Elsewhere on Abu Taqeya's wooden boards, Palestinian protesters, ambulances, Israeli troops and tanks and even the wire fence itself are all created in miniature. He uses empty shells of bullets, tear gas canisters and sometimes shrapnel of Israeli missiles.

A bullet triggered the idea, the artist said. At the first day of the protests, Abu Taqeya's youngest brother was shot in his leg and doctors took out the bullet, which he then brought home.

"I turned it into a small statue of a soldier and I gave it to him," he told Reuters.

"It was then when I got the idea to start recycling the remnants of the occupation," said Abu Taqeya, a 38-year-old retired naval policeman.

Gaza health authorities said some 200 people have been killed by Israeli fire since Palestinians launched the protests a year ago. They are demanding the right to return to land from which their ancestors fled or were expelled during fighting that accompanied Israel's founding in 1948.

An Israeli soldier was shot dead by a Palestinian sniper along the frontier.

Israel says it uses lethal force to defend the frontier from militants trying to destroy its border fence and infiltrate under cover of the protests. On Monday, UN war crimes investigators urged Israel to rein in its troops at the border.

In Nusseirat refugee camp, where Abu Taqeya lives, some neighbours who had been wounded gifted the artist bullets extracted from their bodies.

"This bullet was taken from a girl's body, I turned it into a bullet with a butterfly on the top," said Abu Taqeya.

On Thursday, organizers of the protests called for mass rallies on March 30 to mark the anniversary, raising concerns of possible heavy casualty toll. Abu Taqeya urged demonstrators to steer clear of the fence.

"We must not give the occupation any pretext to open fire. These protests must be peaceful," he said, using a Palestinian term for Israel.

Israel pulled its soldiers and settlers out of Gaza in 2005. Citing security concerns, it still maintains tight control of the Hamas-run territory's borders.



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[Majdi Abu Taqeya](#)
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Palestinian artist brings Japanese origami to Gaza
OIC foreign ministers condemn Israeli violations against Palestinians

[Rare protests erupt against Hamas' 12-year rule over Gaza](#)

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By FARES AKRAM | AP

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Tue, 2019-03-19 19:18

GAZA CITY: Hamas is facing the biggest demonstrations yet against its 12-year rule of the Gaza Strip, with hundreds of Palestinians taking to the streets in recent days to protest the dire living conditions in the blockaded territory.

With little tolerance for dissent, the militant group has responded with heavy-handed tactics. It has arrested dozens of protesters, beaten activists and violently suppressed attempts by local media to cover the unrest. Hamas has accused the rival West Bank-based Palestinian Authority of orchestrating the protests – a charge that organizers vehemently reject. “There is no political agenda at all,” said Amin Abed, 30, an organizer who has been forced into hiding. “We simply want to live in dignity,” he said by telephone. “We just ask Hamas to ease the economic hardships and tax burdens.”

Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 from the forces of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Israel and Egypt imposed a blockade, a step meant to prevent Hamas from arming.

The blockade, and three wars with Israel, have ravaged Gaza’s economy but done nothing to loosen Hamas’ grip on power.

Unemployment is over 50 percent and much higher for young university graduates like Abed. Tap water is undrinkable, electricity is limited and travel abroad severely restricted. Hamas’ cash-strapped government recently raised taxes on basic goods like bread, beans and cigarettes.

Protesters accuse Hamas of corruption and imposing the hefty taxes to enrich itself. They used social media to organize protests last week with the slogan “We want to live!”

The protests come just as Hamas marks the one-year anniversary of its weekly demonstrations along the frontier with Israel. The demonstrations, aimed

largely at easing the blockade, have accomplished little, even as some 190 Palestinians have been killed and thousands wounded by Israeli fire. This is not the first time people have taken to the streets against Hamas. Two years ago, protesters demonstrated against the chronic power cuts on a cold January day before Hamas violently dispersed them. This time around, the sporadic rallies have continued for five days, despite a similarly violent response.

"These protests were the largest, the longest and the most violent in terms of Hamas' suppression," said Mkhaimar Abusada, political science professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University.

"This was a message of anger to Hamas that the situation is unbearable and that it must reconsider all its policies," he added.

On Monday, Amnesty International reported that hundreds of protesters have been beaten, arbitrarily arrested, tortured and subjected to ill-treatment. Journalists and human rights workers, including a researcher for the London-based organization, were also roughed up, Amnesty said.

"The crackdown on freedom of expression and the use of torture in Gaza has reached alarming new levels," said Amnesty's Middle East deputy director Saleh Higazi.

Osama Al-Kahlout, a journalist with the local news site Donia Al-Wattan, last week published a photo of a protester on crutches raising a sign that said "I want to live in dignity." The next day, he was detained as he went live on Facebook during another protest.

Al-Kahlout said police smashed furniture, seized his belongings and beat him on the way to the police station. "I'm a journalist," he said. "I don't regret covering it."

He said he was released after a meeting with the police chief in which officials "advised" journalists not to cover the protests.

Heba el-Buhissi, 31, who filmed the raids at her family home, said a policeman fired a warning shot in the air as others cursed and yelled at her after she started filming. Her videos show a group of Hamas police beating her cousin with wooden batons.

Other amateur videos have shown protesters burning tires and hurling stones toward Hamas forces. Hamas gunmen can be seen jumping out of vehicles and beating people with clubs. Other videos show Hamas going door to door and carrying out mass arrests.

El-Buhissi filmed the incident last Thursday when she saw Hamas dispersing some of her neighbors who had hoisted banners against tax hikes. Her family opened the home to allow youths to escape the police.

"This is what drove the police crazy, and that's why they stormed our houses," she said. "I felt I have to film to prove what was going on."

The Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists reported Monday that 42 Palestinian journalists "were targeted" by Hamas forces in the past five days. The abuses included physical assaults, summons, threats, home arrests and seizure of equipment.

The official Palestinian Authority news agency Wafa reported Monday that the spokesman of Abbas' Fatah movement in Gaza, Atef Abu Saif, was badly beaten by Hamas.

It showed pictures of Abu Said with a bandaged leg, bruises and blood-stained clothes lying on a hospital bed.

Ammar Dwaik, director of the Independent Commission for Human Rights in Gaza,

said Hamas forces have dispersed 25 protests with excessive force and arrested about 1,000 people. He said some 300 people remain in custody. "This is worst crackdown in Gaza since the Hamas takeover in 2007 in terms of its scope and cruelty," Dwaik said.

On Tuesday, Hamas issued a brief statement "rejecting the use of violence and repression against any Palestinian for practicing his legitimate right of expression."

But Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas official, used tougher language in a Twitter post, accusing Israel and the Palestinian Authority of conspiring to organize protests. "The attempts of the Palestinian Authority and the occupation to drive a wedge between the people and the resistance have failed," he said. The demonstrations appeared to subside on Monday, but organizers say the protests will continue until Hamas cancels taxes on dozens of goods, creates a national employment program and releases everyone who has been arrested in the crackdown.

Abed, the protest leader, said Hamas has stormed his family's house and delivered an arrest warrant for him to his father.

"Hamas doesn't want us to scream. It wants us to die in silence," he said.