

Erdogan visits site of Turkey building collapse; death toll 17

Author:

Sat, 2019-02-09 22:44

ISTANBUL: Turkey's president on Saturday visited the scene of the apartment building collapse in Istanbul for the first time, saying there were "many lessons to learn" as the death toll increased to 17.

The cause of Wednesday's tragedy is under investigation but officials have said the top three floors of the eight-story building in the Kartal district were built illegally.

"In this area, we have faced a very serious problem with illegal businesses like this done to make more money," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters at the scene. He said the government would take "steps in a determined way" after investigators complete their work.

Earlier, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca increased the death toll to 17. Erdogan was also visiting a hospital where more than a dozen people are being treated. Seven of them are in serious condition.

Friends and relatives waited near the wreckage for news of their missing loved ones as emergency teams, aided by sniffer dogs, worked around the clock to reach possible survivors.

Officials have not disclosed how many people are still unaccounted for. The building had 14 apartments with 43 registered residents.

The collapse fanned criticism of a government amnesty granted last year to people accused of illegal building – a measure announced ahead of municipal elections this March.

Engineers and architects regularly sound the alarm against illegal additional storeys to buildings which they say weaken the constructions' structure, and put them at greater risk in the event of an earthquake.



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Istanbul building collapse kills 2, rescuers save 6 others Death toll rises to 16 In Istanbul building collapse

[US-backed fighters launch final push to defeat Daesh in Syria](#)

Sat, 2019-02-09 18:26

BEIRUT: US-backed and Kurdish-led Syrian forces said Saturday they have launched a final push to defeat Daesh in the last tiny pocket the extremists hold in eastern Syria.

Syrian Democratic Forces spokesman Mustafa Bali tweeted that the offensive began Saturday after more than 20,000 civilians were evacuated from the Daesh-held area in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor. An SDF statement said the offensive was focused on the village of Baghouz.

The SDF, backed by US air power, has driven Daesh from large swaths of territory it once controlled in northern and eastern Syria, confining the extremists to a small pocket of land near the border with Iraq.

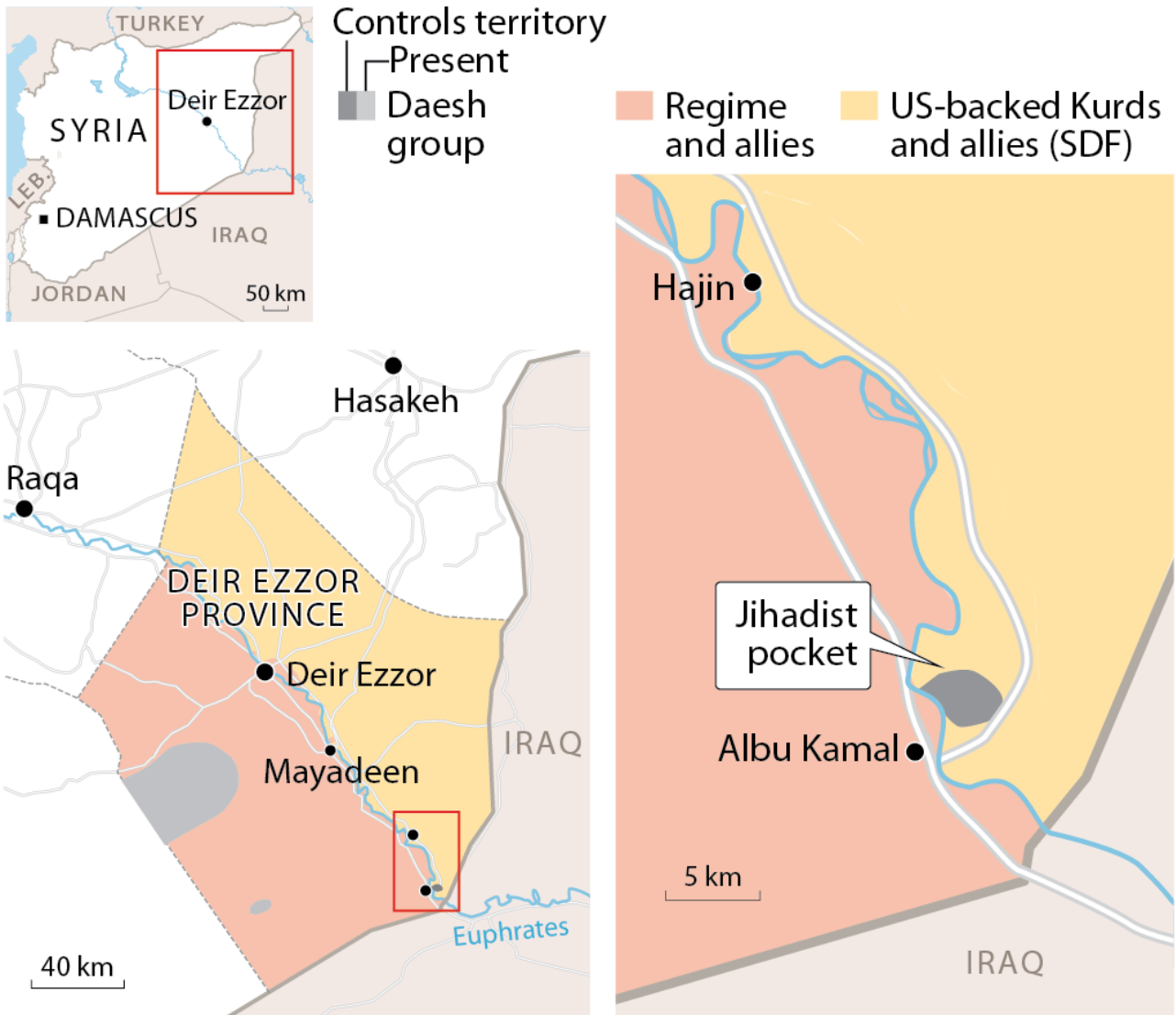
Scores of Daesh fighters are now besieged in a small area consisting of two villages, or less than once percent of the self-styled caliphate that once

sprawled across large parts of Syria and Iraq. In recent weeks, thousands of civilians, including families of Daesh fighters, left the area controlled by the extremists.

“The decisive battle began tonight to finish what remains of Daesh terrorists,” Bali said.

US President Donald Trump predicted Wednesday that Daesh will have lost all of its territory by next week.

Daesh under pressure in eastern Syria



© AFP

“It should be formally announced sometime, probably next week, that we will have 100 percent of the caliphate,” Trump told representatives of a 79-member, US-led coalition fighting Daesh.

US officials have said in recent weeks that Daesh has lost 99.5 percent of its territory and is holding on to fewer than 5 square kilometers in Syria, or less than 2 square miles, in the villages of the Middle Euphrates River Valley, where the bulk of the fighters are concentrated.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that since the SDF began its offensive against Daesh in the area on Sept. 10, some 1,279 Daesh gunmen and 678 SDF fighters have been killed. It said 401 civilians, including 144 children and teenagers, have been killed since then. Earlier Saturday, Daesh militants attacked SDF fighters near an oil field in the country's east, triggering airstrikes by the US-led coalition. The Observatory said 12 Daesh gunmen attacked the SDF and clashed with them for several hours until most of the attackers were killed early Saturday. It said 10 attackers were killed, while two managed to flee. Other activist collectives, including the Step news agency, reported the attack, saying some of the attackers used motorcycles rigged with explosives. The fighting was concentrated near Al-Omar field, Syria's largest.



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Barely alive after Daesh, Syrian babies haunted by malnutrition
Iraqi armed factions hit Daesh targets inside Syria

Algeria's ruling FLN picks Bouteflika as presidential candidate

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2019-02-09 13:41

ALGIERS: Algeria's ruling party FLN has picked President Abdelaziz Bouteflika as its candidate for the April 18 presidential election, party leader Moad Bouchareb said on Saturday.

Bouteflika, 81, who has been in office since 1999 but has been seen in public only rarely since suffering a stroke in 2013 that confined him to a wheelchair, is likely to win a fifth term as the Algerian opposition remains weak and fragmented.

He will still need to make a formal announcement, probably in a letter that will be read on his behalf, before March 3.

"We at the FLN we have decided to pick Bouteflika as our candidate for the April presidential election. Let's be ready for the campaign," Bouchareb told about 2,000 supporters at a sports stadium in Algiers.

"We have chosen him because we need continuity and stability," he added.

Bouteflika's poor health had led to months of uncertainty about whether he would stand for election again.

His re-election would offer short-term stability for the elites of the FLN, the army and business tycoons, and postpone a potentially controversial succession.

But the president will need to find a way to connect with the North African country's young population, almost 70 percent of which is aged under 30.

The OPEC oil producer is a key gas supplier to Europe and a US ally in the fight against terror in the Sahel region.

Bouteflika is part of a thinning elite of the veterans who won independence from France in the 1954-62 war and have run Algeria ever since.

In December, flu meant he was unable to meet Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in Algiers for a two-day visit.

His last meeting with a senior foreign official was during a visit by German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Sept. 17. An earlier meeting with Merkel and a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte were both cancelled.

Algeria avoided the major political upheaval seen in many other Arab states in the past decade but has experienced some protests and strikes.

Unemployment remains high, especially among young people, many of whom have left the country to seek better wages and living conditions.

The economy has improved over the past year as oil and gas revenues have picked up, allowing authorities to ease austerity measures imposed when they halved between 2014 and 2017.

Oil and gas earnings account for 60 percent of the budget and 94 percent of export revenues. But Algeria has around \$80 billion of reserves and almost no foreign debts.

Bouteflika remains popular with many Algerians, who credit him with ending

the country's long civil war by offering former extremist fighters amnesty. Supporters say his mind remains sharp, even though he needs a microphone to speak. The opposition says he is not fit to run again and several candidates, including a retired general, have said they will challenge Bouteflika. The government has said it wants to diversify the economy away from oil and gas, but there has been resistance from those within the ruling elite to opening up to foreign investment. That has left the economy dominated by the state and firms run by business tycoons.





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Algerian brain drain is pre-election headache for government Algerian President Bouteflika, 82, to run for 5th term

[Tough times for political parties as revolution turns 40](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-02-09 00:29

TEHRAN: Iran's main political parties are on rocky ground as the Islamic republic marks its 40th birthday, with reformists in disarray and conservatives seeking a new identity.

Even though key reformist leaders have been forcibly sidelined, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a former reformist vice president in the 1990s, still believes gradual change is the only option for his country.

Since mass protests against alleged election-rigging in 2009, his former boss, ex-President Mohammad Khatami, is barred from appearing in the media, and presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi have been under house arrest for the last eight years.

There are also few signs of a new generation emerging to succeed them, not least because Iran's influential Guardian Council has the power to reject any election candidates it deems unqualified, Abtahi told AFP.

"The candidates that can pass the Guardian Council's vetting are low-level," he said. "You can't expect much from them."

The reformists instead pinned their hopes on President Hassan Rouhani, a political moderate who sought conciliation with the West through a landmark nuclear deal in 2015.

Yet their hopes have proven ill-founded. Since the US unilaterally withdrew from that deal last year, Iran's economy has been in a tailspin, adding to popular anger that burst onto the streets in violent protests across dozens of towns and cities a year ago.

"When the demonstrators shouted 'Reformists, conservatives: The game is over,' they were not wrong," said conservative analyst and politician Amir Mohebbian. "The fact is the (political) game has changed."

"Until now, voters would go for the candidate they thought would do the least harm ... but now they have taken as much as they can stand. Now the people want someone who can actually solve their problems."

Mohebbian did not elaborate on potential candidates as jockeying for the next presidential elections, due to take place in 2021, has not yet started. But the decision to back Rouhani has "bankrupted" the reformists, he claimed.

Journalist and activist Ahmad Zeidabadi, who has been arrested several times, goes further, saying the reformists' plans to try to change the very nature of the state "reached a dead end" some time ago because of the system's lack of "flexibility."

And it is not just mainstream political factions who are demanding change.

Ardent supporters of the revolution believe its original values – such as policies in favor of the poor – have been largely forgotten, pointing to widespread allegations of corruption to back their claims.

For decades, the conservatives have been closely associated with the establishment, many of them holding key unelected positions.

But for them to survive the changing political environment, they "must move closer to the people" since the people "don't trust" them now, Mohebbian said.

Concern over corruption by successive governments has become a "powderkeg," believes Nader Talebzadeh, a film-maker who advised Ebrahim Raisi, the

preferred candidate of ultraconservatives in the 2017 presidential election.



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Ebadi urges world action to weaken Iran rulers on revolution anniversary
US vows to remain 'relentless' to deter Iran missile program

[Ready to bring down Netanyahu, ex-general stirs hope of change](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-02-09 00:16

JERUSALEM: Former military chief Benny Gantz has burst onto Israel's political scene as the great hope of the country's shrinking "peace camp" with a message that is anything but dovish.

The retired general, who wants to topple Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in April 9 elections, boasts of killing Palestinian militants and aligns himself with political hard-liners. He fires back at Netanyahu's criticism with scathing counterattacks.

In today's Israel, Gantz's ready-to-rumble rhetoric appears to be the only

way to bring down the long-serving Netanyahu. That is turning him into an unlikely source of hope for Israelis who view ending their country's rule over the Palestinians, now in its 51st year, as a priority.

Yossi Beilin, an architect of the 1993 interim peace accords with the Palestinians, said fear of another Netanyahu term is driving much of the support for Gantz. He called Gantz a "black dove" – an imperfect but tolerable alternative to Netanyahu.

"Not that I agree with everything he says, but many of the things he is saying are OK from my point of view," Beilin said.

Opinion polls forecast victory for Netanyahu's Likud Party. But since Gantz's recent maiden political speech, his new "Israel Resilience" party has emerged as No. 2.

The race could swing in the challenger's favor. Netanyahu faces possible indictment in a series of corruption investigations, perhaps before the elections. Meanwhile, Gantz is reportedly exploring mergers with other centrist parties.

Gantz appears to be modeling himself after Ehud Barak and the late Yitzhak Rabin – former military chiefs-turned-prime ministers. Both used military credentials to lead security-obsessed Israel to peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

Wary of being branded a "leftist," considered a put-down by many Israelis, Gantz has said little about his vision of peace with the Palestinians. He dresses his rhetoric in security terms as he tries to win support from Netanyahu's nationalist base.

In his January speech, Gantz bragged about assassinating Ahmed Jabari, a former Hamas military commander whose death in an Israeli airstrike in the Gaza Strip sparked an eight-day war in 2012.

"The heads of the terrorist organizations need to know that Ahmed Jabari was not the first, nor may he be the last," Gantz warned.

Without giving details, he vowed to "strive for peace" and – if that is impossible – to shape a "new reality." He said he'd strengthen West Bank settlement blocs and retain control of the Jordan Valley, a strategic section of the occupied West Bank the Palestinians seek as the heartland of a future state.

The UN has said about two-thirds of more than 2,100 Palestinians killed in the 2014 war were civilians.



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Netanyahu channeling Trump in Israel's election campaign
Netanyahu poll rival plans West Bank settlement removals