

North Cyprus journalist takes on Turkey's mighty Erdogan

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-16 22:27

NICOSIA: Jail time, angry mobs and assassination attempts – editor Sener Levent has paid a price for challenging Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and authorities in breakaway northern Cyprus through his tiny newspaper.

Alongside the stacks of old papers on his desk in northern Nicosia, a luminous screen displays footage from security cameras at his office's entrances. The cameras are part of protective measures in place since gun attacks in 2011 targeted Levent, who has run the leftist daily Afrika for the past 20 years.

"There is always a price you pay for freedom of expression," said the 70-year-old Turkish Cypriot, grey hair combed back and sporting a mischievous grin.

"We paid this price... but I believe that a person should get rid of his fears."

In January, hundreds of protesters attacked the paper's offices after it ran an article criticizing a Turkish military offensive against the Kurdish border enclave of Afrin in Syria.

"Afrin, a second occupation by Turkey" after Cyprus, ran the article's bold headline.

Levent is a native of Cyprus, a Mediterranean island whose northern third has been under Turkish military control since 1974.

Turkish troops invaded that year in response to a coup backed by the military junta then in power in Athens that sought to unite the island with Greece – a union staunchly opposed by Turkish Cypriots. Only Ankara recognizes the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). It also bankrolls the entity.

Ankara regards the use of the term "occupation" for its deployment of some 35,000 troops in the TRNC – as well as criticism of its operations against the Kurds in Syria – as defamation. After Afrika's article on Afrin, Erdogan called on Ankara's "brothers in north Cyprus to give the necessary response."

The following day, a crowd of ultranationalists attacked the offices of Afrika – a tiny daily with a 1,500 circulation in a statelet of around 300,000 people – as Turkish Cypriot police stood back and watched.

For media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF), "the hunt for critical media conducted by Erdogan's government" is so widespread that "we can fear a

collateral effect in Cyprus.”

Turkey ranks 157th out of 180 countries on RSF’s 2018 press freedom index.

Ankara holds more than 160 journalists in detention, according to P24, a platform that promotes editorial independence in Turkey.

Contacted by AFP, Turkey’s embassy in northern Cyprus refused to comment on “unfounded allegations” that Ankara interferes with the media. But the head of RSF’s European Union and Balkans desk, Pauline Ades-Mevel, said “a freelance journalist critical of Turkey like Sener Levent can fear the worst.”

Levent currently faces three separate trials in north Cyprus for “defaming a foreign leader,” “insulting religion” and “publishing fake news with the intent to create fear and panic among the population,” his lawyer Tacan Reynar said.

He faces up to five years in prison for the article on Afrin and for republishing a cartoon from social media of a Greek statue urinating on Erdogan’s head captioned: “Through Greek eyes.” To avoid possible arrest, Levent shuns travel to Turkey, a country he says “is no longer a democracy.”

The TRNC leadership has said Turkish Cypriots cannot be extradited to Turkey, and Levent also sees EU citizenship as his protection.

“They know in Turkey that they can’t really do what they are doing to their citizens to a European citizen,” said Levent, a seasoned campaigner for reunification with the island’s Greek Cypriot south, an EU member state since 2004.

His two-decade career has long brought pressure from the Turkish Cypriot authorities.

In 2002, he and colleague Memduh Ener were jailed for nearly two months after “offending” the Turkish Cypriots’ veteran leader Rauf Denktash.

The previous year, an assailant who considered Levent a “traitor” tried on two separate occasions to gun him down.

He has carried a revolver ever since, but remains undaunted.

“The thing that upsets me the most is the silence of people in front of injustice,” he said.

And so, every night, the pages of Afrika continue to roll out from an old-fashioned press in Nicosia. But Levent remains modest.

“The true heroes are those people who are living today in Syria, in Yemen,” countries blighted by war where “women have to face incredible dangers every day.”



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[Israel irked at Australia's 'mistaken' W. Jerusalem recognition](#)

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-16 22:22

JERUSALEM, DUBAI: Israel signaled displeasure on Sunday with Australia's recognition of West Jerusalem as its capital, with a confidant of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying it was a mistake to gainsay Israeli control over the whole city. The premier stayed silent on Canberra's move at a weekly Israeli Cabinet meeting.

US ally Bahrain has meanwhile defended Australia's formal recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, saying the move would not affect a future Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Australia's government announced the decision on Saturday, reversing decades

of Middle East policy, but said it would not immediately move its embassy there.

The US in May opened its embassy in Jerusalem.

The Arab League had issued a statement criticizing the Australian decision as “blatantly biased toward the positions and policies of the Israeli occupation.”

But Bahraini minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa described the statement as “mere rhetoric and irresponsible.”

“Australia’s stance does not impact the legitimate Palestinian demands, first among them being East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and it does not contradict the Arab Peace Initiative,” he tweeted on Saturday.

The status of Jerusalem, home to sites holy to the Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths, is one of the biggest obstacles to a peace agreement between Israel and Palestinians who want East Jerusalem recognized as the capital of a Palestinian state.

Israel regards all of Jerusalem as its capital, including the eastern sector that it annexed in a move not recognized internationally, after the 1967 war. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as capital of the state they hope to found in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The UN says the status of Jerusalem can be resolved only by negotiations.

Israel has diplomatic relations with only two Arab states, Egypt and Jordan. Netanyahu has on several occasions hinted at warmer relations with Gulf Arab states and made a surprise visit to Oman in October to meet with its ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

A year ago, US President Donald Trump outraged Palestinians by recognizing Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, a designation that did not acknowledge their claim on the east of the city though it left open the question of its final borders.

On Saturday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Canberra formally recognizes West Jerusalem as Israel’s capital but reaffirmed his country’s support for a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem under a two-state peace deal.

Israel’s Foreign Ministry responded tepidly, calling the Australian move “a step in the right direction.” At the Cabinet meeting on Sunday, Netanyahu declined to elaborate.

“We issued a statement at the Foreign Ministry. I have nothing to add to it,” he told reporters at the outset of the meeting.

Tzachi Hanegbi, Israel’s minister for regional cooperation and a Netanyahu confidant in the right-wing Likud party, was more openly critical of Australia, though he deemed it a “deep and intimate friend of many years’ standing.”

“To our regret, within this positive news they made a mistake,” Hanegbi told reporters outside the Cabinet room.

Morrison’s move first surfaced in October, when it was viewed cynically in Australia because it came days before a crucial by-election in an electorate with a strong Jewish representation. His party lost that poll.

Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat said Saturday’s move was born of Australian “petty domestic politics.”

“All of Jerusalem remains a final-status issue for negotiations, while East Jerusalem, under international law, is an integral part of the occupied Palestinian territory,” he said.



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[Iran confirms death of blogger held on](#)

security charges

Author:

Reuters

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Sun, 2018-12-16 13:40

DUBAI: Iranian authorities have confirmed the death of a social media activist jailed on security charges, the semi-official ISNA news agency reported on Sunday, after Western rights groups said he had died following a 60-day hunger strike in prison.

"The political prisoner Vahid Sayyadi Nasiri, on hunger strike since October 13, 2018 to protest the denial of his right to counsel and inhumane prison conditions..., has died at the Shahid Beheshti Hospital in Qom," the US-based Center for Human Rights in Iran said on its website.

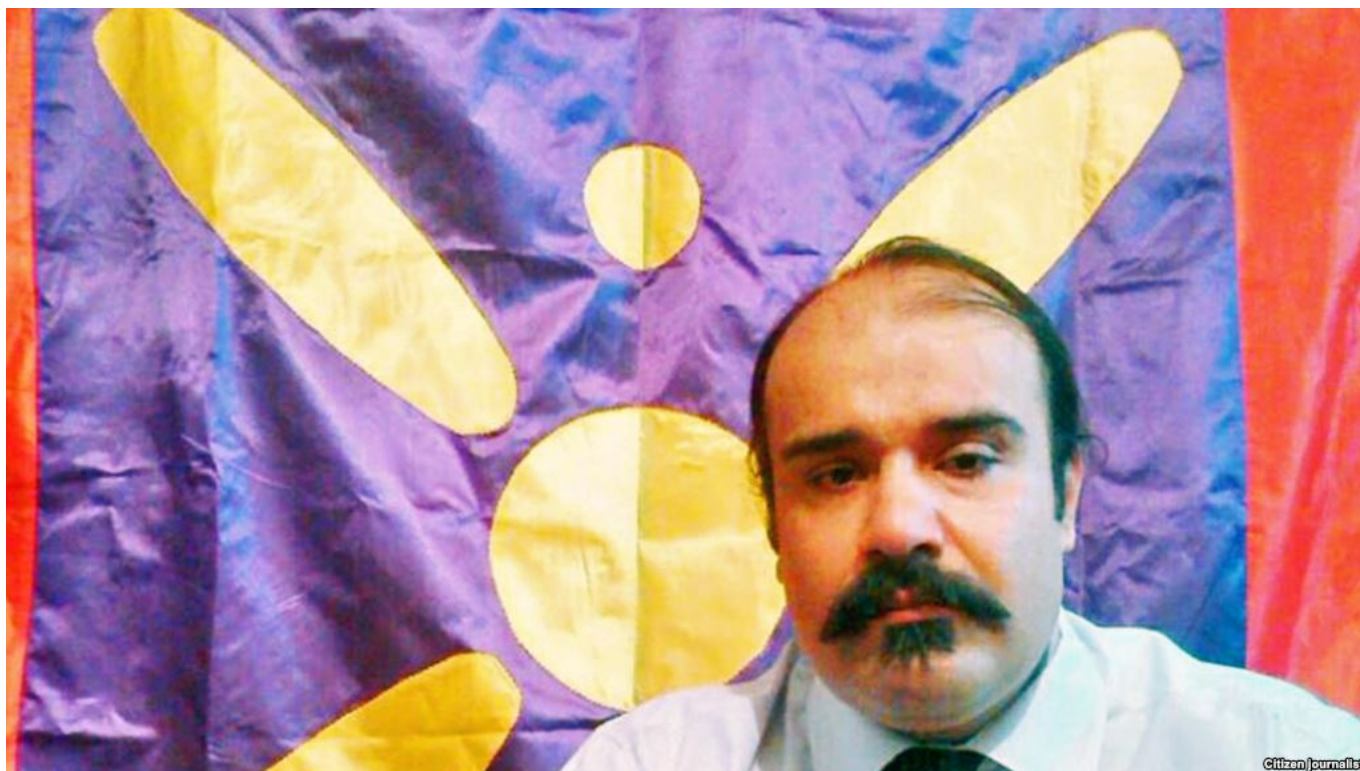
ISNA quoted an unidentified source as saying Nasiri had been jailed twice for belonging to a royalist group and planning acts of sabotage including an explosion. He had been taken from prison to a hospital where he died due to a liver disease on Dec. 12, the source said, without referring to a hunger strike.

Mehdi Kaheh, the prosecutor in the city of Qom, earlier said Nasiri had been serving a sentence for "insulting Islamic sanctities" on social media when he fell ill and was taken to hospital where he died, the state broadcaster IRIB reported on its website. Kaheh did not refer to a hunger strike.

Iran, whose officials often warn of efforts by foreign enemies to infiltrate state institutions, has detained scores of journalists and social media activists in recent years, and many others have gone into exile.

In November, Reporters Without Borders said Iran had launched a new crackdown on journalists in which several had been questioned and three arrested in connection with social network posts.

Iran rejects criticism of its human rights record by international human rights bodies as politically motivated and based on a lack of understanding of Islamic laws.



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[War on militants 'won't end unless West tackles root causes'](#)

Author:

Sat, 2018-12-15 23:36

WASHINGTON: Western powers fighting militant groups around the globe are condemned to a never-ending battle if they only tackle the symptoms and not the underlying causes of militant insurgency, experts say.

"Beyond the tactical victories on the ground, the current strategy is failing," said Katherine Zimmerman, who wrote a recent report for the American Enterprise Institute.

"Every soldier and intelligence analyst that has worked on this problem understands what is happening," Zimmerman told AFP.

"They understand that what they are doing is a temporary solution. It's ending the immediate threat but not stabilizing or moving us forward. The problem comes down to policy and politics," she noted.

"It's easy to say, 'We're going to kill the person responsible for making the bomb.' It is much more difficult to say that our partner government has disenfranchised this group and it's one of the reasons why this person joins the terrorist group. And now he is the bomb maker."

Driven from lands it once held sway over in Syria and Iraq, Daesh has returned to its origins as an underground militant outfit because the conditions that spawned it – a deep discontent among most Iraqis and Syrians – have persisted, experts say.

"The West is on the road to winning all the battles and losing the war," warned Zimmerman.

In a report last month on the resurgence of Daesh as a clandestine guerrilla group, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) said that while the US and allied governments have weakened some groups like Daesh, "many of the underlying causes have not been adequately addressed."

Those root causes include a "fragile state with weak or ineffective governing institutions" in areas affected by militant activity, where the extremists can establish a sanctuary, the CSIS experts said.

They took maps showing areas where Al-Qaeda and Daesh were active and compared them to maps displaying "government effectiveness," based on World Bank statistics.

The result was clear: Most of the countries where the insurgents are active – Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia – are also in the bottom 10 percent for government effectiveness.

At a conference this week in Washington, retired Marine Gen. John Allen – who once commanded US forces in Afghanistan and now heads the prestigious Brookings Institution – said the West had to get ahead of the issue and ask, "Where should we be looking for the next problems?"

"We should spend a great deal more time looking at those areas that are in fragile or failing states," said Allen, who also served as presidential envoy to the international coalition battling Daesh.

"We have to recognize the hotspots where the human condition prompts the radicalization of large sectors of the population," he added.

"Often we join the conversation when the process of radicalization has been in place for quite a long time."

Allen noted that the problem is "a development issue, much more than a counter-terrorism issue."



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US-backed forces expel Daesh from east Syria hub
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[Australia move on Jerusalem slammed](#)

Author:

Sat, 2018-12-15 22:55

RAMALLAH, SYDNEY: The Palestinian leadership on Saturday described as "irresponsible" Australia's recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, saying it violated international law.

Canberra earlier recognized West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, but a contentious embassy shift from Tel Aviv will not occur until a peace settlement is achieved, said Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

"We look forward to moving our embassy to West Jerusalem when practical, in support of and after final status of determination," Morrison said, adding that work on a new site for the embassy was under way.

"All of Jerusalem remains a final status issue for negotiations, while East Jerusalem, under international law, is an integral part of the occupied

Palestinian territory,” he added.

“Furthermore, recognizing our commitment to a two-state solution, the Australian government is also resolved to acknowledge the aspirations of the Palestinian people for a future state with its capital in East Jerusalem,” he added.

The country became one of just a few to follow US President Donald Trump’s lead and recognize the contested city as Israel’s capital.

Australia said it would open a defense and trade office in the west of the holy city and also committed to recognizing a future state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Both Israelis and Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital.

Most foreign nations avoided moving embassies there to prevent inflaming peace talks on the city’s final status – until Trump unilaterally moved the US Embassy there earlier this year.

Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat said in a statement that the Australian decision to open a trade office in the city violated a UN resolution.

“From the beginning, we’ve perceived the Australian government’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital as one wherein petty domestic politics steer irresponsible policies that contradict world peace and security,” he said in a statement.

Morrison first floated the shift in foreign policy in October, the move angered Australia’s immediate neighbor Indonesia – the world’s most populous Muslim nation.

The issue has put a halt on years-long negotiations on a bilateral trade deal.

Canberra on Friday told its citizens traveling to Indonesia to “exercise a high degree of caution,” warning of protests in the capital Jakarta and popular holiday hotspots, including Bali.

Morrison pointed to Australia’s military history in the region, and the country’s interest in a “rules-based” order in the Middle East, to support the shift in foreign policy.



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Australia recognizes west Jerusalem as capital of Israel
Australia warns citizens ahead of expected Jerusalem move