

Turkish philanthropist Kavala gives final defense in protest trial

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1650608605027780900

Fri, 2022-04-22 06:17

ISTANBUL: Turkish philanthropist Osman Kavala and seven other accused delivered their final defense statements on Friday in a long-running case over nationwide protests held in 2013 that has strained Ankara's ties with its Western allies.

Kavala, 64, has been in jail for 4-1/2 years without a conviction and denies the charges he and 15 others face over the Gezi protests, which began as small demonstrations in an Istanbul park and snowballed into nationwide anti-government unrest, in which eight protesters were killed.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and activists say the case is politically motivated and symbolic of a crackdown on dissent under President Tayyip Erdogan's rule, claims the government denies.

The court had previously been expected to reach a verdict on Friday, but it was unclear whether that would happen or the hearing would be adjourned until Monday, given that statements remain to be given by defense lawyers.

Prosecutor Edip Sahiner has said Kavala and architect Mucella Yapici should be convicted of attempting to overthrow the government through violence, which would carry a sentence of up to life in prison without parole.

Speaking to the court via video link from prison, Kavala said: "It is evident that those who issued the indictment did not feel constrained by laws, considering that they will receive political support as they intended to prolong my detention."

The courtroom was packed with some 200 people, including opposition members, rights groups and Western diplomats.

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Prosecutor Sahiner has said six others should be sentenced for aiding Kavala and Yapici, while asking that the case against the eight other defendants be separated.

Kavala and another defendant, whose case the prosecutor also said should be separated, are also accused of involvement in a coup attempt in 2016, which the ECHR said also lacks evidence.

The ECHR called for Kavala's release in late 2019 and ruled his detention served to silence a philanthropist whose civil society projects aimed to foster social change.

But Turkish courts have not freed Kavala, and Ankara faces being suspended from the Council of Europe rights watchdog, after "infringement proceedings" were launched due to his continued detention.

Embassies of Turkey's Western allies, including the United States and Germany, echoed the call for Kavala's release last year, prompting threats by Erdogan to expel their ambassadors.

Erdogan equates the Gezi protesters with Kurdish militants and those accused of orchestrating a failed 2016 coup and has targeted Kavala personally, saying Western allies would not release “bandits, murderers and terrorists” in their countries.

Kavala was acquitted in 2020 of charges related to the Gezi protests. Hours later another court ordered his arrest on a charge of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order related to the coup attempt.

That court later ruled to release him on that charge but ordered his detention on an espionage charge in the same case, a move critics said was aimed at circumventing the ECHR ruling.

Kavala’s acquittal along with eight others in the Gezi trial was overturned last year and the case was combined with the other charges against him.



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Turkish court rules to keep philanthropist Kavala in prison

Dozens wounded in clashes at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa compound

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1650603608707542100

Fri, 2022-04-22 04:34

RAMALLAH: The UN voiced deep concern at the worsening violence between Israel and the Palestinians, as clashes erupted again at Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa Mosque compound on Friday.

"We are deeply concerned by the escalating violence in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel over the past month," said Ravina Shamdasani, spokeswoman for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Palestinian medics said at least 57 Palestinians were injured in clashes with Israeli police at the compound on Friday.

People were injured by rubber-coated metal bullets, along with dozens of cases of suffocation, during a raid by Israeli security forces.

The Palestinian Red Crescent Society in Jerusalem earlier reported that its crews dealt with 31 injuries caused by rubber-coated metal bullets, including two serious injuries.

The Israeli police arrested a young man with bullet wounds from the mosque's courtyard, restricting access to the mosque for worshippers.

Nearly 150,000 Palestinians performed the third and penultimate Friday prayer of Ramadan at Al-Aqsa, despite the restrictions imposed on the checkpoints at the entrances to Jerusalem and in the city's streets.

Sheikh Omar Al-Kiswani, director of Al-Aqsa Mosque, said that tens of thousands were able to arrive and perform Friday prayers, despite the violence at the compound.

"We expected that the number of worshippers on the third Friday of Ramadan would reach more than 300,000, but the Israeli restrictions and barriers prevented that," he told Arabs News.

The Israeli authorities had imposed a strict security closure on the Palestinian Territories from April 21-23, which prevented Palestinians from entering Israel, even with permits, but relented for those over the age of 50 and with permits ahead of Friday prayers.

Dozens of citizens, including women and children, were suffocated after tear gas canisters were fired at the mosque compound from Israeli drones.

The Israeli Channel 12 reported that a high-level Israeli-Jordanian meeting would be held after Ramadan to discuss the situation.

The police deployed 3,000 personnel in and around the Old City of Jerusalem and the surrounding streets leading to the mosque in anticipation of trouble. The Israeli government has also indicated that it intends to stop Jewish visits to Al-Aqsa Mosque from Friday until the end of Ramadan.

"The Israeli authorities informed us officially through Jordanian channels that Jewish visits to Al-Aqsa would be stopped until the end of Eid Al-Fitr on May 7," Al-Kiswani confirmed to Arab News.

The continuation of Israeli security operations at Al-Aqsa has posed problems for Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's coalition government.

On April 17, the United Arab List suspended its participation in the coalition in protest against Israeli security operations during the second weekend of Ramadan, coinciding with Passover.

Intensified operations at the Al-Aqsa compound throughout Ramadan and potentially during the Nakba and Jerusalem Day commemorations on May 15 and 28-29 will further pressure the list to consider permanent withdrawal, precipitating the collapse of the coalition, which lost its majority after Idit Silman's resignation on April 6.

The Palestinians believe Bennet's government has demonstrated that its policy is based on accepting the temporal division of Al-Aqsa Mosque between Muslims and Jews, as happened previously with the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron.

Given the importance and sensitivity of the issue of Al-Aqsa Mosque, it would be embarrassing for Ra'am party leader Mansour Abbas to remain in a government responsible for such a division, given his faction's opposition to it.

Many of the 1.5 million Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship believe Abbas has fallen victim to a political trap by Bennett.

May 8 will be the real test after the Knesset returns from its holiday, and it seems Bennett is not confident of his coalition's survival.

Political experts believe the coalition may collapse in the second half of May.

Israeli and Arab political affairs expert Mohammed Darawsheh told Arab News that Bennett's "right-wing positions were known to us before, but his extreme right-wing performance surprised us a lot, as he tries to restore his legitimacy in the Israeli right-wing frameworks."

Bennett's policies, especially toward the Arabs and Al-Aqsa Mosque, have put Abbas in a difficult place.

At the same time, many Palestinians believe Abbas's response is late, arguing that if he had had a political vision, he would have set clear limits for

Bennett before things escalated.

Darawsheh said: "Abbas is in a bad situation and needs a miracle to save him, and suspension of his participation in the Knesset is not a political maneuver but rather an attempt to delay the government's fall. But Abbas's stay in the government would constitute suicide for him and the movement that supports him.

"Abbas entered the government at an economic price without even asking for the legislation of an equality law or amending or cancelling the racist national law. However, he did not achieve any economic achievement," he added.

"Abbas thought that Arab society would accept an equation of money in exchange for dignity, but he learned a harsh lesson when he realized that the Arab society belongs to his national cause more than he belongs to his pocket."

In a statement by the spokesperson for the UNHCR on the situation obtained by Arab News on Friday, deep concerns were raised about the escalating violence in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel over the past month.

"Last weekend saw Israeli security forces injure around 180 Palestinians, including at least 27 children, during tensions in the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. The witnessed conduct of Israeli security forces on April 15, captured in numerous videos, raises serious concerns that the use of force was widespread, unnecessary, and indiscriminate," it said.

"Several Palestinians, including elderly, women, children and at least one journalist, did not appear to pose any threat to the Israeli security forces in any manner.

"The use of force in law enforcement operations is strictly limited and governed by international norms and standards. The use of force by Israeli police resulting in widespread injuries among worshippers and staff in and around the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound must be promptly, impartially, independently and transparently investigated.

"Those responsible for any violations should be held to account, and policies and procedures on using force reviewed to avoid any further violations. The tension in Jerusalem has impacted other areas as between April 18-21, Palestinian armed groups launched six rockets and one mortar shell toward Israel."



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UAE FM calls for calming Al-Aqsa situation during call with Israeli counterpart
Top Israeli journalist lambasts Tel Aviv for 'brutality' at Al-Aqsa compound

[Turkey's refugee problem at the center of heated debates](#)

Thu, 2022-04-21 23:48

ANKARA: Turkey's migration management policy has become a hot topic in recent days, with members of the public asking for stricter security measures against irregular inflows.

The growing hostility toward refugees has not only been triggered by a worsening economic situation in Turkey, but also following a series of recent incidents.

The memories are still fresh following protests in Ankara last August against houses and workplaces owned by Syrians, following reports that a Syrian refugee stabbed two Turkish men in a fight.

Amid widespread criticism from opposition parties that want refugees deported, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Wednesday that Syrian refugees would voluntarily return to their country once peace is established in Syria.

According to Prof. Murat Erdogan of Ankara University, 85 percent of Turks want Syrians to be repatriated or to be isolated in camps or safe zones.

There is also an ongoing debate in Turkey about whether to allow Syrian refugees to return if they are able to briefly visit their homeland during the upcoming Eid al-Fitr holiday.

The Turkish government is currently working on a plan to restrict the passages during Ramadan, discouraging many Syrians from leaving over fears they may not be allowed back into Turkey.

“Irregular migration is an unnamed invasion,” said the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party, Devlet Bahçeli, the coalition partner of the ruling government.

The topic, which gained momentum after the recent arrival of about 60,000 Ukrainian refugees to Turkey, has been promoted by anti-immigrant parties, such as the Zafer Party, who have said they will send all refugees back to their home countries after 2023 elections.

“Turkey is indeed bound by international law of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of anyone to a place where they would be at risk, and this principle is also protected by the national laws including the temporary protection offered to Syrians,” Begum Basdas, researcher at the Centre for Fundamental Rights at the Hertie School in Berlin, told Arab News.

Turkey hosts about 3.7 million Syrians. Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu recently announced that some 500,000 have returned to safe areas created in northern Syria after Turkey’s cross-border operations, and more than 19,000 Syrians have been deported since 2016 for breaking the law.

“Treating migrants as bargaining chips by states is nothing new, but what is worrisome today is that the public is also in on the ‘game.’ We must recognize that Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees in the world, and this is a strength, not a burden,” said Basdas.

Turkey has awarded citizenship to 192,000 Syrians so far, but the opposition has also asked for more security checks in granting citizenship, as they claim some criminals use it to cross over Turkey’s borders.

Ahead of the upcoming elections in 2023, the main opposition Republican People’s Party pledged to send Syrian migrants back to their countries, and reconcile with the Assad regime to ease the return of Syrian nationals.

Friedrich Puttmann, a researcher at the Istanbul Policy Center, said the reasons why most Turks today reject Syrian refugees are diverse, including economic, social and political reasons.

“Economically, many Turks perceive the Syrians to be the cause of rising rental prices and Turkish citizens’ joblessness. That is because one third of the Turkish economy is informal and most Syrians work informally too, however, most of the time for lower wages than Turks. For many Turks, this the reason why they can’t find work anymore,” he told Arab News.

“Moreover, many Turks tend to believe that the Turkish state privileges Syrians by not collecting taxes on their entrepreneurial activity, giving them privileged access to health care and education, and paying them welfare benefits that are not available for Turks. Most Turks don’t know that the latter two are mostly financed by the EU in fact. However, the seeming injustice this creates in the eyes of Turkish citizens upsets many of them,” he added.

According to Puttmann, Turks’ attitudes toward Syrian refugees also have a political dimension, which mirrors Turkey’s internal struggles over national identity.

“On the surface, many secular Turks reject Syrians for being too religiously conservative whereas many religiously conservative Turks reject Syrians for not behaving like ‘proper Muslims.’ Under the surface, both criticisms are expressions of how different Turks would like to see their country and are therefore more directed at Turkish society in general than at the Syrian refugees in particular,” he said.

Puttmann also thinks that, with the omnipresence of nationalism, most Turks come together in fearing that Syrians will not adapt to Turkish society and one day will outnumber them.

But, the voluntary return of Syrian refugees to their homeland remains unlikely, as the present conditions in Syria are still not conducive for them to rebuilding a life.

“Many Syrians have lost all they had, fear Assad, and their children may have grown up more in Turkey than Syria by now. This means that no matter how many Syrians will eventually return to Syria, a certain number will most likely stay in Turkey forever,” Puttmann said.

According to experts, Turkish authorities should work on sustainable solutions, like resettlement to third countries, for sharing responsibilities with the international community.

For Basdas, it is not possible to “open the gates to Europe for refugees” or “send them back to Syria in buses.”

She said: “Such electoral wishful promises are not soothing to anyone, but fuel further anti-refugee sentiments and racism in Turkey and provokes the public to the route of pogroms and violence. There is no return from there.”

Puttmann agrees and said that there is a need for a pro-active nationwide integration strategy to fully fit Syrians into local society.

“First, Turkish society should formulate what it expects of Syrian refugees to be integrated, taking into consideration the refugees’ rights and own expectations as well.

“Second, Turkey should come up with a plan of how to get there.

“Third, the EU should support this process with expertise and financial aid, as solving the refugee issue in Turkey is also in the EU’s vital interest.”



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Turkey formally arrests journalist over posts on personal information leak
Turkey begins large-scale operation in northern Iraq against Kurdish militants

Mobile is mightier than the gun as Palestinians find a social media voice

Author:

Thu, 2022-04-21 23:33

RAMALLAH: Israel has long had the upper hand when it comes to exploiting social media in the war of influence with its Palestinian opponents – but that may be changing.

Hundreds of Palestinian accounts have been frozen on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter, based on Israeli claims that they contain “provocative content.”

However, Palestinians are refusing to surrender to the ban and increasingly are shifting to TikTok, a move that has angered Israel.

The Beijing-based Chinese multinational ByteDance, which owns the application, has refused several Israeli demands to shut down Palestinian accounts over alleged provocative material after similar requests were agreed to by Facebook and Twitter.

TikTok has become a major instigating factor in recent incidents in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as #FreePalestine trended on the app.

Mobile cameras in the hands of the Palestinians have become an effective tool to document unfolding events and tell the world their side of the story.

Palestinians and Israelis told Arab News that the app played an important role in the escalation of events at the Damascus Gate and Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem in May 2021, which led to the outbreak of an 11-day war between Hamas and Israel.

Videos published on TikTok by young Palestinians encouraged others to join in clashes with Israeli troops and security forces.

According to Palestinian and international social media sources, there were 3.73 million internet users in Palestine in January 2022, about 70 percent of the Palestinian population.

LinkedIn is used by 300,000 Palestinians, while 1.35 million use Snapchat. TikTok’s use is rising significantly – 27.7 percent of the Palestinian population uses the app, while Twitter is used by 26.4 percent of Palestinians. More than 4.37 million cellular mobiles are connected to the net.

Meanwhile, the mobile camera has become more lethal than the gun in the hands of Palestinians filming settler assaults, Israeli troops’ mistreatment of Palestinians at checkpoints, home demolitions and raids at Al-Aqsa Mosque, with footage eliciting a strong reaction worldwide. Even Gaza’s rulers Hamas have a Twitter channel in English.

The increasingly effective Palestinian presence on social media platforms is causing growing concern in the Israeli government, which has set up a special team with members from the foreign and defense ministries and the Israeli security agency Shin Bet to handle the issue.

Israeli security officials have warned soldiers against accepting suspicious friendship requests on Facebook or other platforms after Hamas activists posed as attractive Jewish women and befriended special forces members to collect intelligence from them.

Israel also has cracked down on Palestinians' social media activities, recently arresting 30 people because they "liked," commented on, or shared a controversial post.

Some Palestinians have received phone calls either from Shin Bet in the West Bank or the Israeli police in East Jerusalem asking them to remove their posts or face arrest. Israeli security agencies believe that "incitement" through social media and coverage of attacks in the traditional media generate violence.

The Israeli police's Arabic media desk launched a Telegram channel on April 20 to reach out to a wider Arab audience and defend its version of recent events at Al-Aqsa, following the widespread dissemination of footage showing Israeli police allegedly beating women, the elderly and children.

Dozens of Palestinian community activists in the US and international peace campaigners have also intensified their activities on social media platforms to condemn Israeli attacks on Palestinians since the beginning of Ramadan and the violent clashes at Al-Aqsa.

In a bid to sway US public opinion, activists republished videos and images detailing Israeli violence against Palestinians in Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and West Bank cities.

Activists also used a variety of hashtags to relay the content to members of Congress.

Protests are planned in US cities, including Los Angeles and New York, in coming days in support of Palestinian rights and to denounce Israeli aggression.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the director of one of the largest internet service providers in the Palestinian territories told Arab News that Palestinians' restricted movement and lack of options are pushing them to spend more time online.

"It has become an essential part of the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation and is enabling the Palestinian narrative to be known," the director said.



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Bella Hadid continues to speak up for Palestinians on Instagram
Social media in Lebanon tells a tale of two different worlds

[Israel says no change to status-quo at Jerusalem mosque compound](#)

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1650563140494011700

Thu, 2022-04-21 20:48

JERUSALEM: Israel said on Thursday it was enforcing a long-standing ban on Jewish prayer at the compound of Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, rejecting an Arab League accusation that it was allowing such worship to take place. Violence at the compound, revered in Judaism as the Temple Mount and by Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, has surged over the past week, raising concerns about a slide back into wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli security forces have been on high alert with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan coinciding with the Jewish holiday Passover and Christianity's Easter.

The Arab League said Israel has broken the status-quo and was allowing Jews to pray at the compound, calling it a "provocation." Israel, however, said there has been no change in its long-standing ban on Jewish prayer at the flashpoint site.

"Israel is maintaining the status quo, which includes the freedom of prayer for Muslims and the right to visit for non-Muslims. The police enforce the ban on Jewish prayer," said Lior Haiat, a spokesperson for Israel's Foreign Ministry.

"Over the last few years, Israel is not allowing Jews to visit the Temple Mount during the last 10 days of Ramadan to prevent any friction," he said. That 10-day period starts on Friday.

The future of Jerusalem is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Old City is in East Jerusalem, captured by Israel in a 1967 war and annexed in a move that has not won international recognition.

Palestinians want East Jerusalem to be the capital of a state they seek to establish in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.



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Israel bars Jewish groups from Al-Aqsa until Ramadan end in bid to halt violence
Top Israeli journalist lambasts Tel Aviv for 'brutality' at Al-Aqsa compound