

Controversial tree planting bid nearly topples Israeli government

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-13 22:47

AMMAN: A controversial tree-planting effort on lands owned by Palestinians in the Negev area of Israel by the Jewish National Fund has threatened to blow up the razor-thin ruling coalition in Israel.

Jafar Farah, head of the Mossawa (Equality) NGO, told Arab News that the controversy had been brewing for weeks.

Farah said: "Last week, security-protected JNF employees dug up the area of Sawa in the Negev.

"Knesset Member Mansour Abbas, whose list received 40 percent of its vote from Palestinians in the Negev, came to the area and promised the tree planting would stop.

"It didn't, as the JNF came against this Monday. Abbas responded by threatening not to vote in favor of any government laws in protest."

The Israeli coalition needs Abbas's four votes to retain their one-member majority of 61 out of 120 Knesset members.

Farah told Arab News that his organization has three demands.

"We call on the government to recognize the rights of the Palestinian landowners, issue building permits to 36 unrecognized villages where 100,000 Palestinian Citizens of Israel live, and thirdly the JNF should be dissolved."

Botrus Mansour, a Nazareth-based lawyer and political analyst, told Arab News that Abbas needs to show his constituency that he can defend them and their rights.

"The government already approved providing electricity to homes built without a license in Israel. Even though the implementer is right-wing Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, but the coalition needs to understand the needs of one of its partners. Now he needs to use his power to end the JNF's controversial involvement."

Wadie Abu Nassar, director of the International Center for Consultations, told Arab News that he is not sure of the outcome of the situation in the Negev. Israel's strategy for confiscating land through tree planting has seen the state take control of more than 90 percent of the land. Nassar warned that Israel is seeking more gains.

"MK Mansour appears to have averted temporarily the crisis but it will be interesting to see what happened to the 30 detainees who are in jail now,"

said Nassar.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel tweeted that “the intent of JNF’s ‘foresteing’ is clear: To seize as much land as possible and prevent Bedouin communities from accessing their lands.”

Jessica Montell, executive director of the Jerusalem-based Human Rights Organization, Hamoked, tweeted: “Don’t be fooled by any green-washing. JNF’s mission is to dispossess Arabs/Palestinians.”

Ofer Zalzburg, director of the Middle East Program at the Herbert C. Kelman Institute, told Arab News that the disagreement in the Negev is particularly challenging because the issue relates to land ownership and use, therefore evoking national and religious sentiments on both sides.

Moreover, the coalition faces pressures from both ends simultaneously: Right-leaning parties in government are criticized by Likud for betraying settlement ideals; and Raam, – Abbas’s Islamic party – whose electoral base draws heavily on Negev Bedouins, is criticized by the Joint List and the Islamic movement’s Northern Branch for being complicit in Israeli land grabs.

“The coalition seems likely to overcome this and in so doing signal that it can address even differences regarding highly symbolic matters.”



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[Jewish National Fund](#)

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Israeli police and Bedouin clash in tree-planting protests
Israeli MP faces heat for remarks on settlers

[Russian airstrikes in Syria kill 11 Daesh members](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-13 23:52

BEIRUT: Russian airstrikes in desert areas of eastern Syria have killed 11 suspected members of Daesh, a war monitor reported Thursday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors casualties of the decade-old conflict, said the overnight strikes focused on an area between Palmyra and Al-Sukhna.

Daesh's members "hide in caves in this area," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

The strikes killed 11 Daesh suspects and wounded around 20 others, some of them seriously, he said.

Abdel Rahman said he had counted a total of 229 Russian airstrikes against targets in the Syrian desert already this year.

Thursday's strikes were the deadliest of their kind since November, when the Observatory reported 16 killed in terrorists' ranks.

Daesh's self-declared caliphate once stretched across vast parts of Syria and Iraq and administered millions of inhabitants.

A long and deadly military fightback led by Syrian and Iraqi forces with backing from the US and other powers eventually defeated the extremists' proto-state in March 2019. The remnants of Daesh mostly went back to their desert hideouts from which they continue to harass Syrian government and allied forces.

The group is thought to be attempting to secure sources of funding through trafficking and racketeering, prompting observers to warn of an extremist resurgence in the region.



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Syrian, Russian airstrikes in Idlib amount to war crimes, as do extremist attacks – UNFirst Russian airstrikes in three months hit northwest Syria

[Lebanese bus, truck drivers block roads over soaring prices](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-13 22:22

BEIRUT: Lebanon's public transport drivers blocked roads on Thursday, paralyzing traffic throughout the country in protest against the manipulation of exchange rates that has left them out of pocket.

A driver in downtown Beirut said: "We can barely afford hospitalization or medicine. We are begging healthcare associations for our rights that the state is supposed to secure for us."

Banks did not open on Thursday, as employees were unable to get to work, while schools and universities were also closed.

In less than a year since the removal of subsidies, the price of a 20-liter canister of gasoline has increased tenfold to almost 400,000 Lebanese pounds (\$264), while the minimum monthly wage of 675,000 pounds has remained unchanged.

Fadi Abou Shakra, a representative of Lebanon's fuel distributors who took part in the protests, said: "Our issue with the state is the rise in the exchange rate. Officials did nothing to control the illegal platforms manipulating the exchange rate. It is not our hobby to block roads and create problems. Today is a day of anger and we'll see what next week brings."

Soldiers and other security forces were deployed to control the situation after disputes broke out between protesters and members of the public trying to use the blocked roads.

The protesters were supported by the head of the General Labor Union, Bechara Al-Asmar, who said the action was "a cry for officials to perform their role and duties toward the people."

The protesters' demands focused on maintaining subsidies on bread, fuel and other basic items, he said, adding that he was disappointed at the small number of people involved in the action.

Several public transport drivers said they were against the protest and would not take part and were not affiliated with the parties that initiated it.

Bassam Tlais, head of the Land Transport Union, said: "Today is directed against the government, which has not fulfilled its promises to support the land transport sector and stop violations. We could not care less about politics or the reasons for the Cabinet's failure to convene."

Political observers said Thursday's protests were linked to the Cabinet impasse caused by ministers from Hezbollah and the Amal Movement boycotting sessions. The labor unions are controlled by unionists loyal to the two parties.

Meanwhile, a huge explosion rocked the Nabatiyeh region at dawn on Thursday.

Lebanon's National News Agency said: "A fire broke out in a private electricity generator. The flames quickly reached a diesel tank belonging to a cafe in Wadi Houmine. The fire spread to neighboring areas and caused the explosion of mines, cluster bombs and old unexploded ordnance from the Israeli aggression in July 2006."

Residents of the towns of Houmine, Roumine and Deir Ez-Zahrani reported fires breaking out in the surrounding forests. Others said members of Hezbollah rushed to the scene of the explosion and cordoned off the area, preventing reporters from getting too close.



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How Lebanon's antiquated citizenship laws deny stateless people and their children basic rights and welfare
Extortion, kidnappings on rise in crisis-hit Lebanon

[Desert tree planting sows discord within Israel's coalition](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-13 00:15

SAWE AL-ATRASH, Israel: Government-sponsored tree planting in an Israeli desert has set off violent protests by Bedouin Arabs who see the forestation as discriminatory encroachment by the state, sowing discord within Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's ethnically mixed coalition.

Coming days before the Jewish arbor festival of Tu Bishvat, the drive to turn the sandy expanses of the southern Negev green hails back to Israel's founding pioneer narratives.

But the nomadic Bedouin claim private ownership over nationalized land being

zoned and accuse Israeli courts of enabling expropriations as part of a campaign of disenfranchisement that has kept many of their community in off-the-grid breeze-block encampments.

The diggers rolled this year despite an appeal by Mansour Abbas, a Bennett coalition partner from Israel's Arab minority, for a deferral "while we work on a decent plan that would grant Bedouin citizens honorable lives and livelihoods."

"A tree is not more important than a person," he tweeted.

Authorities have said the flattening of the dunes and planting of trees is necessary for conservation and modernization.

At the Negev village of Sawe Al-Atrash, Bedouin scuffled with riot police on Wednesday after a night in which authorities said protesters blocked roads, stoned motorists and forced a train to halt by piling rocks on its tracks.

Mansour's United Arab List party was boycotting parliamentary votes, a coalition spokesman said.

If sustained, that could deny Bennett his razor-thin majority and bolster the Jewish-nationalist opposition.

Asked how far UAL was willing to go, party lawmaker Iman Khatib Yassin said: "All the way."

"We came into this partnership hoping to find partners who understand that Arab citizens of the country have a basic right and deserve basic rights on their lands," she told Kan radio, while stopping short of any threat to quit the coalition.

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, a centrist, urged a halt to the contested forestation.

Despite successive governments' pledges of equitable Negev investment, "the Bedouin problem has been forsaken," he said in a statement.

The religious-rightist Bennett did not comment. His ideologically kindred housing minister, Zev Elkin, saw no need to heed such calls. "These are state lands," Elkin told 103 FM radio.

Some protesters on Tuesday evening hurled stones at vehicles on a highway near Beersheba, blocked the railway line and torched a vehicle. Police said two officers were wounded in the violence and local media reported at least 18 people arrested.

The government announced a compromise in which it would complete the day's planting and launch negotiations on Thursday. Authorities withdrew heavy machinery from the area as the tensions appeared to ease.

The Bedouin are part of Israel's Arab minority, which makes up some 20 percent of the country's population.

They have citizenship, including the right to vote, but face discrimination. Arab citizens of Israel have close family ties to the Palestinians and largely identify with their cause.



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Israeli MP faces heat for remarks on settlers
In Israel, omicron, confusion drive 'real panic' for tests

[European archaeologists back in Iraq after years of war](#)

Wed, 2022-01-12 23:43

NASIRIYAH, Iraq: After war and insurgency kept them away from Iraq for decades, European archaeologists are making an enthusiastic return in search of millennia-old cultural treasures.

"Come and see!" shouted an overjoyed French researcher recently at a desert dig in Larsa, southern Iraq, where the team had unearthed a 4,000-year-old cuneiform inscription.

"When you find inscriptions like that, in situ, it's moving," said Dominique Charpin, professor of Mesopotamian civilization at the College de France in Paris.

The inscription in Sumerian was engraved on a brick fired in the 19th century B.C.

"To the god Shamash, his king Sin-iddinam, king of Larsa, king of Sumer and Akkad," Charpin translated with ease.

Behind him, a dozen other European and Iraqi archaeologists kept at work in a cordoned-off area where they were digging.

They brushed off bricks and removed earth to clear what appeared to be the pier of a bridge spanning an urban canal of Larsa, which was the capital of Mesopotamia just before Babylon, at the start of the second millennium B.C.

"Larsa is one of the largest sites in Iraq; it covers more than 200 hectares," said Regis Vallet, researcher at France's National Center for Scientific Research, heading the Franco-Iraqi mission.

The team of 20 people has made "major discoveries," he said, including the residence of a ruler identified by about 60 cuneiform tablets that have been transferred to the national museum in Baghdad.

Vallet said Larsa is like an archaeological playground and a "paradise" for exploring ancient Mesopotamia, which hosted through the ages the empire of Akkad, the Babylonians, Alexander the Great, the Christians, the Persians and Islamic rulers.

However, the modern history of Iraq – with its succession of conflicts, especially since the 2003 US-led invasion and its bloody aftermath – has kept foreign researchers at bay.

Only since Baghdad declared victory in territorial battles against the Daesh group in 2017 has Iraq "largely stabilized and it has become possible again" to visit, said Vallet.

"The French came back in 2019 and the British a little earlier," he said. "The Italians came back as early as 2011."

In late 2021, said Vallet, 10 foreign missions were at work in the Dhi Qar province, where Larsa is located.

Iraq's Council of Antiquities and Heritage director Laith Majid Hussein said he is delighted to play host, and is happy that his country is back on the map for foreign expeditions.

"This benefits us scientifically," he told AFP in Baghdad, adding that he welcomes the "opportunity to train our staff after such a long interruption."

Near Najaf in central Iraq, Ibrahim Salman of the German Institute of Archaeology is focused on the site of the city of Al-Hira.

Germany had previously carried out excavations here that ground to a halt with the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

Equipped with a geomagnetic measuring device, Salman's team has been at work in the one-time Christian city that had its heyday under the Lakhmids, a pre-Islamic tribal dynasty of the 5th and 6th centuries.

"Some clues lead us to believe that a church may have been located here," he explained.

He pointed to traces on the ground left by moisture which is retained by buried structures and rises to the surface.

"The moistened earth on a strip several meters long leads us to conclude that under the feet of the archaeologist are probably the walls of an ancient church," he said.

Al-Hira is far less ancient than other sites, but it is part of the diverse history of the country that serves as a reminder, according to Salman, that "Iraq, or Mesopotamia, is the cradle of civilizations. It is as simple as that!"



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