

# Morocco farmers mourn loss of date palms in border standoff

Author:

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FIGUIG: Moroccan farmers in an isolated oasis on the Algerian border are bearing the brunt of regional tensions after Algiers expelled them from date groves they have worked for generations.

The border between the arch-rivals has been closed since 1994, but Algeria had allowed some residents of the Moroccan frontier town of Figuig to cross into the date groves of Al-Arja, known to Algerians as the Laaroda oasis. In recent days, Algeria has withdrawn that right, deploying soldiers to enforce the move.

"Everybody feels wronged," said Mohamed Jabbari, an unemployed 36-year-old who joined a protest in Figuig against the move.

"Agriculture is the only resource we have. There's no work here, no factories."

On Thursday, some 4,000 people – around half of Figuig's population – attended an angry demonstration against Algeria's decision.

Morocco's regional authorities organized a meeting to "examine possible solutions to mitigate the impact" of a decision they said was "temporary."

The Figuig oasis, sitting on a caravan route on the edge of the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara desert, was settled in ancient times.

Trade began to decline after the border was drawn in 1845, and diplomatic disputes between Algiers and Rabat soon turned Figuig into a dead end.

Before the border was drawn, the tight-knit Berber community had moved freely in the area.

Now, to reach relatives just a short distance over the sealed border, residents say they have to first take a plane to Algiers.

Algeria has justified the latest move by claiming farmers have failed to comply with regulations and that drug-trafficking gangs were operating in the area.

Figuig residents have strongly rejected those allegations.

"The expulsions are a political decision," said Mohamed El Jilali, head of a local association.

## **BACKGROUND**

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The expulsions coincide with a rise in tensions between the two countries in recent months over the disputed Western Sahara.

Rabat considers the territory to its south a sovereign part of the kingdom – a position given Washington's seal of approval in the final days of the Trump

administration.

Algeria has backed the Polisario Front which seeks independence for the territory.

Hundreds of kilometers away in Figuig, residents have more immediate concerns: Their livelihoods.

The oasis, a three-hour drive to the nearest towns of Oujda and Errachidia, struggles to attract tourists.

That is despite its beautiful architecture and landscapes, which residents hope will eventually earn it a UNESCO World Heritage listing.

That leaves many residents reliant on date palms for a living.

Over the years, farmers have planted dates in areas beyond the wadi, or valley, that marks the border, taking advantage of the area's groundwater.

The more recently planted areas produce a better harvest than traditional gardens surrounded by adobe walls and irrigated by a complex network of hand-built canals, farmers say.

The area evacuated this week covers around 1,500 hectares and includes sought-after Aziza date palms.



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[Berber community](#)

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# Iran's Khamenei insists US sanctions must be lifted first

Author:

AFP

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Sun, 2021-03-21 16:42

TEHRAN: Iran's supreme leader on Sunday reiterated the Islamic republic's "definite policy" that Washington must lift all sanctions before Tehran returns to its commitments under a 2015 nuclear deal.

"The country's policy regarding interaction with JCPOA parties and the JCPOA itself has been clear," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a televised speech, referring to the accord by its official name, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

It "entails that the Americans must lift the sanctions, all the sanctions, and then we will verify and if they are truly lifted, then we will return to our JCPOA commitments."

Khamenei stressed that lifting sanctions "on paper is not acceptable" and had to be implemented "in practice."

The deal was meant to provide Iran with international sanctions relief in exchange for limitations on its controversial nuclear program.

But it has been on life-support ever since former US president Donald Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and reimposed sanctions as part of a "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran.

Joe Biden, who defeated Trump at the ballot box in November, has signalled his readiness to revive the accord, but his administration insists Iran must first return to its nuclear commitments, most of which Tehran has suspended in response to US sanctions.

Tehran has insisted Washington make the first move by scrapping the sanctions.

"If they accept and implement the policy we have announced then everything will be fixed. And if they don't, things will continue as they are now, and it is not an issue," Khamenei said.

He also repeated Tehran's stand that "maximum pressure has failed" and warned if the Biden administration "wants to continue maximum pressure, they will fail as well."

On upcoming presidential and municipal elections, Khamenei said intelligence services of Iran's "enemies," mainly the US and Israel, had been trying to utilize social media to discourage voters and "reduce participation."

"They either accuse those holding it, (saying) the elections have been rigged or whatever, or they accuse the respected Guardian Council," a vetting body, he said.

"Or they discourage the people, saying: 'Your vote has no impact, it will not help improve the situation, (so) why bother?'"

Voters are on June 18 to elect a successor to President Hassan Rouhani, who is in his final four-year term.

Under Iranian law, candidates must be vetted by the powerful Guardian Council

watchdog before being allowed to run.

Voter turnout hit a historic low of less than 43 percent in 2020 parliamentary polls after thousands of reformist candidates were barred from running, leading to a conservative landslide.

Khamenei also said Iranian social media “must not be left to the enemy that they would conspire” against Iran, calling for them to be “managed.”

His warning comes after a report in Israeli media that a “No to Islamic Republic of Iran” campaign was gaining traction on social media.

The hashtags #NoVote and NoToIslamicRepublicOfIran have spread on Twitter, in both Farsi and English.



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Twitter suspends Khamenei-linked account after posting Trump-like golfer ‘revenge’ image

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# Turkey's COVID-19 deaths rise above 30,000, total cases top 3 million

Author:

Reuters

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Sun, 2021-03-21 17:34

ISTANBUL: Turkey's COVID-19 death toll rose above 30,000 on Sunday, while the cumulative number of cases topped 3 million, weeks after the country started easing restrictions, health ministry data showed.

The country recorded 102 deaths in the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 30,061, according to the figures. It was the first time the daily tally has broken through the 100 mark since early February.

A total of 20,428 cases were recorded in the same period, raising the cumulative number of cases to 3,013,122.

Turkey began easing restrictions against the pandemic on a province-by-province basis in early March, at a time when the nationwide daily infection rate was below 10,000.

Cases have been rising in provinces across Turkey since then, but President Tayyip Erdogan said on Monday no new restrictions would be imposed for now. He said he hoped people would follow existing restrictions.

Authorities have blamed the rise in infections on the new variants of the coronavirus.

The daily average of cases per 100,000 people in Istanbul rose to 251.12 as of March 19, and to 107.99 in Ankara, according to the data.

Those numbers compared with 89.9 in Istanbul and 39.84 in Ankara, both on Feb. 26.

Turkey, with a population of 83 million, has administered about 13 million vaccine doses in a campaign that began in mid-January. Nearly 8.02 million people have received a first shot and nearly 5.05 million a second dose of the vaccine developed by China's Sinovac Biotech.



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## [Israel takes Palestinian minister's VIP pass over ICC meeting: Palestinians](#)

Author:

Reuters

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RAMALLAH: Israeli authorities confiscated the VIP border pass of Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad Al-Maliki upon his return to the West Bank from a meeting at the International Criminal Court, a Palestinian official said on

Sunday.

Ahmed Al-Deek, an official at Maliki's office, told Reuters the Israeli move was linked to Maliki's meeting with ICC lead prosecutor Fatou Bensouda at her office in The Hague on Thursday.

Israel's Walla news website cited unnamed Israeli officials who said Maliki's ICC visit was the reason for the revocation of his VIP card, an Israeli-granted pass that enables dozens of senior Palestinian officials to move freely through border crossings.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office declined to comment and the Israeli foreign ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

"This is the Foreign Minister of the State of Palestine. He doesn't represent himself. He represents the State of Palestine, and we regard this as an attack against the State of Palestine," said Deek.

He added that Israeli officers detained and questioned Maliki's aides for 90 minutes at the Israeli-operated border crossing between Jordan and the West Bank.

Deek said that the minister left the crossing without the card. It was not clear when it would be returned to him.

Bensouda announced this month she would formally investigate war crimes in the Palestinian Territories, a move welcomed by the Palestinian Authority and denounced by Israel.

On Friday, ICC prosecutors said they have sent Israel and the Palestinians notifications of the opening of a war crimes probe, a move that leaves the parties with one month to seek a deferral.

Maliki's office said on Thursday that he met with Bensouda to urge that the investigations be accelerated.



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## [First Turkish air strikes on Kurdish zone in Syria in 17 months: monitor](#)

Author:

AFP

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BEIRUT: A Turkish warplane on Saturday bombed a zone in northern Syria held by Kurdish militias, Ankara's first strike on the country in 17 months, a monitor said.

"A Turkish warplane targeted military positions of the Syrian Democratic Forces in the village of Saida on the outskirts of Ain Issa," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Turkey launched airstrikes and fired artillery against Kurdish fighters in northern Syria in October 2019 after then President Donald Trump pulled US troops back from the area, abandoning the Syrian Kurdish fighters, known as YPG, who have been America's only allies in Syria fighting the Daesh group.

Turkish President Recept Tayyip Erdogan has accused the YPG of being allies of rebels who have been seeking self-rule from Ankara.





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