

# Algeria anti-govt protesters hit streets after year-long hiatus

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ALGIERS: Thousands of anti-government protesters took to the streets of Algeria's capital on Friday as the Hirak pro-democracy movement gathers renewed momentum after a year-long hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic. Despite a ban on gatherings over the pandemic, crowds gathered in several neighborhoods of Algiers in the early afternoon and marched toward the city center, AFP journalists said.

"It's awesome. It's like the big Friday Hirak protests," one demonstrator said.

The Hirak protests were sparked in February 2019 over former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term, and the long-time leader was forced from power in April that year.

Demonstrators kept up weekly protests after Bouteflika's resignation, demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

They only suspended marches last March due to coronavirus restrictions, but calls have recently circulated on social media for a return to the streets.

## **BACKGROUND**

**The Hirak protests were sparked in February 2019 over Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth presidential term, and the long-time leader was forced from power in April that year.**

Protesters on Friday were met by security forces who used truncheons and fired tear gas when a crowd forced its way through a police barrier to reach the Grand Post Office, the main Algiers rallying point of the Hirak protests, footage posted on the Interligne news site showed.

The crowd chanted "Civil state, not military state" – a key rallying cry of the protests, which refers to the military establishment that holds sway over Algerian politics.

Police vans took up positions near main squares in the city center and roadblocks were set up on several major roads leading into the capital. Rallies were also held in some provinces, including in northeastern Kabylie and northwestern Oran, where a prominent human rights activist, academic Kadour Chouicha, was arrested, according to prisoners' rights group CNLD. In Algiers, people among the crowd said there appeared to be at least as many people in the streets as last Monday, when thousands marched to mark the second anniversary of the Hirak protests.



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Thousands march through Algiers on anniversary of Hirak protests  
French mountaineer's killing: Algiers trial opens

## [UN agency's decision to cut aid to Gaza Strip refugees raises concern](#)

Sat, 2021-02-27 01:40

GAZA CITY: Mohammed Rashwan is worried for his family of 10 after a decision from the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to reduce aid to Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip.

He was diagnosed with cancer about seven years ago and relies on the relief aid provided by the agency.

"A single basket of aid is not enough for us for a month, but it used to fill part of our needs, in addition to relief aid from local institutions," he told Arab News.

He qualified as being a member of the poorest group of beneficiaries and so received double aid, known as the "Yellow Coupon."

But on Feb. 20 UNRWA said it was canceling this coupon, which helps 770,000 Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. The strip is home to 2 million Palestinians.

Rashwan described the decision as “unjust” because it did not take different living conditions into consideration.

Under the new system, he will lose about half the aid he used to receive every three months, and there will instead be a unified food basket system for all beneficiaries.

Last Sunday he, along with other angry refugees, protested the coupon’s cancellation by closing UNRWA supply centers.

A meeting held last Monday by the Joint Committee for Refugees with the director of UNRWA’s operations in Gaza, Matthias Schmale, failed to dissuade the agency from its decision.

## **FASTFACT**

**Cancer victim Mohammed Rashwan describes the UN Relief and Works Agency’s decision as ‘unjust’ because it does not take different living conditions into consideration.**

Committee member Bakr Abu Safiya said there was agreement between different refugee representative bodies about challenging the UNRWA decision, with the agency being given a Monday deadline to pledge a written letter rescinding its decision.

Abu Safiya added that it was too early to talk about options if UNRWA stuck to its guns, but stressed there would be “a program of action and we will not violate the rights of refugees, and the matter may reach the point of demanding the firing of Schmale.”

Schmale, who was appointed to the post in Oct. 2017, has not enjoyed a good relationship with refugee representatives in Gaza.

Abu Safiya described Schmale as “elusive” since taking office and said he had made decisions that were “harmful to refugees, such as reducing services, stopping employment, and fabricating a crisis of employees’ salaries.”

The meeting with Schmale was “stormy and did not produce a result,” he said. “We will wait for an official position until Monday, after which the response will be considered.”

UNRWA was established in 1949 by a UN General Assembly resolution. It provides services in various sectors to about 5.6 million Palestinian refugees registered with it in its five fields of operations: Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. UNRWA media adviser, Adnan Abu Hasna, said the agency would adhere to its decision and not back down.

“UNRWA, in its new vision for the distribution of foodstuffs, wants to produce a fairer and more transparent system for new groups that will be included in the base of beneficiaries of food aid.”

According to Abu Hasna, the new system would benefit tens of thousands more refugees, with an increase of 10 kilos of flour per person.

But Abu Safiya described the new system as a “crime against refugees” and accused the agency of manipulating the numbers of beneficiaries.





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Gaza launches COVID-19 vaccinations, with just 22,000 doses After delay, Israel allows vaccines into Hamas-run Gaza

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## [US launches strike against Iranian forces in Syria](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-02-27 01:30

CHICAGO: A US airstrike in Syria targeted facilities belonging to an Iranian-backed armed group, killing one fighter and wounding several others, according to the Associated Press. However, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based group that monitors the war in Syria, said as many as 22 fighters were killed.

Thursday's strike signaled the first military action undertaken by US President Joe Biden, who took office on Jan. 20.

Pentagon officials said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack at the International Airport in Erbil on Feb. 15 that killed one civilian

contractor and wounded a US service member and other coalition troops.

Biden's decision to attack in Syria did not appear to signal an intention to widen US military involvement in the region but rather to demonstrate a will to defend US troops in Iraq and send a message to Iran.

"I think the very limited nature of the strike means both that it is unlikely to cause an escalation, and it is unlikely to change Iranian behavior," said Justin Logan, a Fellow at the Conservative Cato Institute.

"Just as limited strikes from Iran-linked militias are unlikely to change US policy in Iraq. What is the point? There is a schoolyard logic to the strike – he hit me first – but the question ought to be about what effect it is expected to produce."

US Senator Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, said the attacks were clearly intended to target Iranian regime proxy militia groups operating in Syria.

"The American people deserve to hear the administration's rationale for these strikes and its legal justification for acting without coming to Congress," Kaine said in a statement.

"Offensive military action without congressional approval is not constitutional, absent extraordinary circumstances. Congress must be fully briefed on this matter expeditiously."

Kaine, who has challenged presidential actions to expand military force without congressional authorization, introduced legislation to prohibit a war with Iran without bipartisan support from the Senate and the House, but the bill was vetoed by former President Donald Trump.

Former US ambassador to Morocco, Edward Gabriel, defended the strikes saying they were a necessary response given Iran's violence against American targets.

"This attack, coming on the advent of US-Iranian talks, sends the important message that we, the United States, will not allow Iranian-sponsored attacks on US personnel and will respond to any such threat accordingly," said Gabriel, who is a member of the Arab Americans for Biden coalition.

"It was measured and indicates that the Biden administration seems prepared for a negotiation with Iran that not only deals with curbing Iranian nuclear ambitions, but will also not tolerate Iranian proxy aggression in the region anymore."

Ali Safavi, an official with the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran, said the Iran regime only understands a policy of firmness.

"So long as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and its proxy groups and militias continue to operate in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, wreaking havoc in the Middle East, incidents such as the ones in Erbil, Ballad, and Baghdad will persist," Safavi said.

“Tehran only understands the language of firmness; weakness only emboldens it.”



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US airstrike in Syria sent ‘unambiguous message’: White House  
US bombs facilities in Syria used by Iran-backed militia; monitor counts 17 killed

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## [Pro-government rallies cause outrage in Turkey](#)

Author:

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ANKARA: Large rallies for Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and other “superspreader” events have sparked public outcry, with the government accused of double standards in the country’s fight against the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

In recent weeks, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has attended these crowded events – some resembling pop concerts – along with other provincial congress

meetings across the country.

The indoor events, with thousands in attendance, have been criticized over a lack of social distancing. Meanwhile, peaceful protests of university students and ordinary meetings of some dissident NGOs are still forbidden because they do not respect pandemic measures.

Restaurants, coffee houses and art excursions remain shut under pandemic restrictions, which has left thousands of laid-off workers on the verge of chronic poverty and merchants grappling with bankruptcy.

"Shopkeepers have closed shutters and they are utterly devastated. The AKP's rallies are wide open and everybody is smiling," Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the head of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party, said during his parliamentary speech on Tuesday.

The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party was fined for violating social distancing rules after one of its events, but no punishments have been imposed for the pro-government rallies.

Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, who advises against large rallies, publicly apologized after Erdogan and a group of AKP officials gathered at a mosque in Istanbul on Feb. 21 for the funeral of a clergyman.

"I should have foreseen such a situation," Koca said Wednesday. "It is my mistake. As 83 million people, we should equally self-sacrifice ourselves by staying away from closed spaces and crowded areas during the pandemic."

Thousands of people forbidden from attending funerals, along with millions of children still unable to attend school, have taken to social media to express their anger and criticize the fairness of pandemic restrictions.

A video featuring AKP youth members from the southern Hatay branch dancing, singing and carrying each other on their shoulders all without masks has gone viral and was dubbed the "political corona party."

A recent survey by the government revealed that only 40 percent of the Turkish people trust the administration's management of the COVID-19. Turkey is ranked 74th out of 98 countries in the Lowy Institute's COVID Performance Index, which assesses each nation's performance in managing the virus.

"I have not seen or heard anything like this," Ozlem Kayim Yildiz, a neurologist from Sivas University, tweeted. "In the midst of the pandemic, while restrictions continue, 'some' are exempt from these restrictions. Has the caste system arrived? They do not even bother to obey their own rules. They don't even care about looking consistent or thoughtful."

So far, the coronavirus has killed 370 health professionals in Turkey.

Urartu Seker, a medical specialist from Bilkent University, echoed the widespread criticisms from those in the scientific community: "I'm very sorry, for those who follow the rules, those who lost their jobs, and for children who are out of school," he said.



Turkey's population continues to struggle financially as it deals with pandemic restrictions. About 100,000 shopkeepers closed their businesses last year, while about 40,735 companies ceased operations.

Millions are expected to lose their jobs after the Turkish government lifts the ban on layoffs in May, which will be a huge blow for a country that is already dealing with more than 11 million people unemployed.



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Protestants in Turkey asked to spy on community  
Turkey's pro-Kurdish party MPs targeted in legal barrage

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## [UN slams Iran over minority-rights record as unrest in country continues](#)

Author:

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LONDON: The UN has slammed Iran for its record on minority rights and denounced an “apparently coordinated campaign” against minorities in the country. It comes after days of violence and unrest in the Sistan and Baluchestan province.

“In Iran, an apparently coordinated campaign has been targeting minority groups since December, including in Sistan and Baluchestan, Khuzestan, and in the Kurdish provinces,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet. “Mass arrests and enforced disappearances have been reported, as well as increasing numbers of executions following deeply flawed processes.

“Across the country, the exercise of civic freedoms and political or critical expression continue to be targeted through national security laws, criminal prosecution and intimidation.

“I am concerned at persistent impunity for human-rights violations, including violations that occurred in the contexts of protests in 2018 and 2019.”

Ethnic Arabs in Khuzestan and Kurds in Kurdistan province have long suffered at the hands of the regime, as have ethnic Baluchis in Sistan and Baluchestan, where in the past week unrest and violence has flared between them and security forces.

On Monday, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps fired on fuel smugglers on the Iran-Pakistan border, killing 10 people according to Human Rights Watch. Since then protests and violence against the local government in Iran have escalated.

On Tuesday, protesters attacked the county governor’s office in Saravan, a city in Sistan and Baluchestan. In a separate incident unknown assailants attacked a police station, also in Saravan, with light weapons and grenade launchers, resulting in a firefight that left one police officer dead.

Iranian officials said the unrest has been brought “under control.” However, sources in contact with people inside Iran said that despite a crackdown by Tehran across the province and an internet blackout, protesters blocked highways and occupied government buildings on Thursday.

Ali Safavi, a member of Paris-based Iranian opposition group the National Council of Resistance in Iran, told Arab News that his sources there estimate the death toll related to the unrest could now be as high as 40.

“Iran’s ethnic minorities, including the Baluchis, Kurds and Arabs, have suffered tremendously from the mullahs’ discriminatory policies and practices,” he said.

“The savage crackdown, including the deployment of tanks, on the defenseless people of Saravan and other cities in the Sistan and Baluchestan Province is, by any measure, a crime against humanity.

“The international community should waste no time condemning the slaughter in the strongest language possible and launch an independent international inquiry.”

Safavi condemned the lack of response from EU nations to the violence, and slammed plans to proceed with an EU-funded online Europe-Iran Business Forum next week, despite egregious human-rights abuses in the country and terrorist activity on the European continent that has been linked to Iran.

“To the EU, making a buck by European business is more valuable than the lives of the Iranian people,” he said.



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