

With little to show, Gazans question mass border protests

Author:

Fri, 2019-10-11 22:39

GAZA CITY: Ahmed Abu Artima was one of the founders of the "Great March of Return," the weekly protests along Gaza's frontier with Israel meant to draw attention to the plight of the territory's 2 million people. But these days, he mostly avoids the demonstrations. He is among a growing number of Gazans who believe the protests have lost their way. With little to show from 18 months of demonstrations beyond the hundreds of people killed or wounded by Israeli fire, many Gazans are beginning to question and even criticize the Hamas-led protests, a rarity in a territory where dissent is barely tolerated by the ruling group.

For several months now, Abu Artima has organized his own alternative protest. On a recent Wednesday, dozens of Palestinians gathered near the separation fence between Israel and Gaza, performing traditional dances and ballads between poem recitals and speeches by local community leaders. Children gathered around two camels decorated with embroidered saddles.

Abu Artima's eyes sparkled as he watched. This is the kind of demonstration he envisioned when he and other young grassroots activists came up with the idea of building mass encampments along the fortified frontier. He calls it a protest that "tries to deliver our message as safely as possible."

Held every two weeks, these events are in dramatic contrast to the main Friday protests.

Friday rallies

Directed by a committee comprising Hamas and other Gaza groups, the Friday demonstrations are held against a backdrop of black smoke from burning tires. Protesters hurl rocks at Israeli troops, who respond with clouds of tear gas and gunfire. Ambulances scream back and forth, ferrying the wounded to field clinics and hospitals.

When the protests began, Hamas quickly seized upon the popular idea and transformed the quiet gatherings into violent confrontations.

Under its direction, thousands of Palestinians have gathered at five sections of the fence each week, facing off against Israeli forces perched on earth mounds and in sniper positions.

The Israeli troops fire live shots, rubber-covered steel pellets and tear gas, in what Israel says is a legitimate tactic to defend against attacks and border infiltrations.

Hamas says the violent protests, which are still attended by a few thousand people every Friday, are meant to force Israel to ease its crippling blockade. But the demonstrations have done little to improve conditions in Gaza, and have come at a high human cost.

The Gaza-based Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights says 211 Palestinian protesters, most of them unarmed, have been shot dead during the demonstrations, including 46 under the age of 18. More than 18,000 have been wounded. The Health Ministry says 124 had amputations in lower limbs. One

Israeli soldier has also been killed.

With Hamas dedicating this week's protest to "child martyrs," UN Humanitarian Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick urged both sides to protect children. "Boys and girls must never be targeted, put at risk or encouraged to participate in violence," he said.

NUMBER

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Calling his event "The Return Journeys," Abu Artima says he is focused on his original idea of highlighting the desire of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to the lands they fled or were forced from during the 1948 war surrounding Israel's establishment. Some two-thirds of Gaza's population are refugees.

"We want to present a model for the people that we can send our voice by art and national songs," he said. "Our presence here even without direct confrontation is a message of determination."

While the "right of return" was the original message of the demonstrations, Hamas quickly turned the focus to the 12-year-old blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt after it seized control of Gaza in 2007.

The blockade has devastated Gaza's economy and caused the unemployment rate to skyrocket to over 50 percent. Israel says the closure is needed to prevent Hamas from arming.

Leverage

Hamas views the protests as a key form of leverage in getting the closures lifted, so it urges maximum participation. On days before protests, vehicles with loudspeakers mounted on their roofs tour Gaza streets and mosques urging families to head to the fence. On Friday, buses pick up participants from across the strip.

There have also been calls to storm the frontier. In May 2018, as the US was opening its embassy in Jerusalem after relocating it from Tel Aviv, more than 55 Palestinians were killed in a single day as tens of thousands protested amid Hamas calls to cross into Israel.

To prevent what could have been a fourth war in a decade between Hamas and Israel, mediators rushed to contain the protests. Under an unofficial Egyptian-brokered truce, Hamas scaled down the marches in recent months while Qatar delivered cash infusions for Hamas' civil servants and welfare programs. UN-sponsored job creation programs were also envisioned.

Hamas scaled back the protests, triggering more accusations that it was acting for its own interests. Critics include scores of people who were shot in the legs. In Gaza's overwhelmed medical system, such cases often end with amputations.

In a video circulated in August, a father scolded his wounded son at a hospital for going to the protests and accused doctors of not providing

proper medical care for the teenage boy.

Hamas officials also came under fire after a press photo went viral showing rows of amputees at a Hamas event, each waiting for a \$50 welfare payment.



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Palestinian, 21, wounded during clashes along Gaza border dies from injuries
Short stories from Gaza describe life in the 'world's largest prison'

[Celebratory gunfire: How to stop Lebanon's stealthy killer](#)

Thu, 2019-10-10 23:46

BEIRUT: Celebratory shootings in the air, or what Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, Lebanon's general security chief, called the "stealthy killer," is a phenomenon some Lebanese still hold on to to express their joys and sorrows. This phenomenon was the theme of the workshop organized on Thursday in Beirut.

The workshop focused on "applying behavioral sciences to put an end to

indiscriminate shootings on occasions.”

Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim said: “People have a human and moral right to express their feelings in a joyful celebration or a sad occasion. However, they cannot do so by shooting – a crime that shall be subject to the most severe punishment and social condemnation.”

Dr. Rana Shami talked about “her suffering at the American University of Beirut Medical Center AUH, as she tried to heal injured people with stray bullets, that ended the lives of many.” Dr. Shami launched the project “Stray Bullet Initiative,” as part of a campaign to combat this phenomenon.

Gen. Ibrahim said: “We can no longer tolerate silence on the random shooting phenomenon. Decisive action must be taken at state level and its security and judicial entities, and even the local authorities, in parallel with civil society.”

According to official figures, the number of victims of the uncontrolled weapons in 2017 was 500, 170 of whom died. This number fell in 2018 to 300, including 120 deaths.

Maj. Gen. Ibrahim noted that “the dangers of random shootings are present all across the Lebanese regions, without exception.”

“This phenomenon reflects the fragility of the Lebanese state and its institutions and causes a serious rift in the society. It is a disgrace to have ignorant individuals among us who still use weapons to express their joys or sorrows,” he added.

He demanded “the consolidation of the penal code, as has happened in many countries, especially Japan, where such negative factors have dramatically dropped.” He suggested “shedding light on this issue in schools through the adoption of awareness-raising curriculums and programs.”

The Lebanese brag about owning arms at their homes, while only 30,000 permits have been issued by the relevant authorities at the Defense Ministry.

One of the articles of the 1959 Law on the permits of arms' possession stipulates that "citizens have the right to obtain a firearm permit for 'self-defense purposes'." The Lebanese civil war in 1975 increased the Lebanese sense of the need for self-protection.

Head of the General Security Center in Chouf Maj. Dounia Abu Saeed said: "Arms in Lebanon have become a means to celebrate a childbirth, the victory of an election candidate or the success of a student, or even to express grief over the loss of a young man killed in a traffic accident."

She said the workshop aims to "come up with non-traditional solutions to combat one of our society's most dangerous behaviors, for random shooting is a security matter with behavioral roots that does not require security-related methods and ideas, but the design of simple effective and inexpensive choices developed by experts in behavioral science from the Business School departments at Warwick University in the UK. They replace bullets with roses. We must understand the psychological aspect of shooters."

Until 2016, the Lebanese Penal Code did not provide a clear classification of the crime of "random shooting", where the Constitution stipulates that 'No offense may be established or penalty imposed except by the text of Law'. However, since Nov. 3, 2016, random shooting in Lebanon has been a crime, punishable by Law according to the gravity of the result. It can reach a minimum of 10 years of hard labor, with a fine of 20 to 25 times the minimum wage, in the case of a random shooting leading to casualties.



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Major exercise tests Lebanon's response to chemical attack
US sanctions squeezing Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon

Iraq Parliament blocks PM's proposed Cabinet reshuffle

Thu, 2019-10-10 23:41

BAGHDAD: Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's proposed Cabinet reshuffle failed to get the support of Parliament on Thursday. Iraqi lawmakers told Arab News that the prime minister had not provided the necessary legal justifications for replacing the incumbent ministers.

In the past week, violent demonstrations have broken out in Baghdad and nine southern Shiite-dominated provinces in protest against corruption, high unemployment and poor standards of living.

At least 180 people, including security personnel, have been killed and more than 7,000 injured during the demonstrations, while protesters have set fire to tires from military vehicles and government buildings, according to medical and security sources.

Abdul Mahdi has sought to placate protesters by launching a package of reforms – which he described as “exceptional” – including unemployment benefits, the construction of housing for poor families, the provision of low-interest loans for the poor, and punishment of corrupt officials.

SPEEDREAD

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On Wednesday evening, Abdul Mahdi announced three days of national mourning for those who have died in the protests, as well as the release of anyone arrested in the last 10 days who was not implicated in murder or sabotage. He also announced his proposed Cabinet reshuffle.

According to the Iraqi constitution, the prime minister does not have the right to replace any of his ministers without providing legal justification to convince Parliament to ratify his amendments.

On Thursday, the prime minister presented two candidates for the vacant ministries of education and health, while requesting the appointment of new ministers of communications, displacement and migration, and industry. But

the request he sent to the speaker of Parliament, which Arab News has seen, did not include any legal justification for that request.

The parliamentary blocs that attended the session on Thursday included Al-Nassir – led by former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi – and Al-Hikmah, led by the Shiite cleric Ammar Al-Hakim. They approved the proposed appointments for the vacant ministries of education and health, but boycotted the rest of the session.

“We do not want to be a false witness to what this government is doing,” Adnan Al-Zurffai, the head of Al-Nassir parliamentary bloc told Arab News.

“This (proposed reshuffle) is a prosthetic solution that does not address the actual problems. The ministers that Abdul-Mahdi has requested to be replaced have nothing to do with the political scene or the demands of the demonstrators. The corrupt people are still sitting in their offices and no one has touched them.”

Abdul Mahdi and the leaders of the political blocs reached an initial agreement in June for a Cabinet reshuffle involving six ministries – oil, electricity, communications, health, agriculture, and industry – due to poor performance or suspicions of corruption. But the majority of those blocs now say that Abdul Mahdi did not discuss his proposed reshuffle – which excluded oil, agriculture, and electricity, but included displacement and migration – with them.

“Abdul Mahdi is playing with fire. Even the Speaker of Parliament did not have any information on the alleged Cabinet reshuffle,” a prominent Sunni politician told Arab News. “The initial agreement was for a real Cabinet reshuffle to depose a number of corrupt and failed ministers, but what Abdul Mahdi did is something else.

“All he proposed was to replace unwilling ministers with candidates from political blocs and armed factions that helped him to survive the recent crisis,” he continued. “He and his allies are doing nothing but working to secure everything necessary to prolong his government. Meeting the actual demands of the demonstrators is their (lowest priority).”



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Iraq begins national mourning for protest dead
Calm returns to Iraq, as US condemns violence

[Crime wave in Israel's Arab towns exposes rift with police](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 23:31

MAJD AL-KRUM: In the week since three men were killed in a midday shootout in an Arab town in northern Israel, the country has seen mass protests, complaints of police negligence and a public debate about violence in Arab communities that has veered into racist generalizations.

A recent spike in killings within Arab towns has exposed the longstanding mistrust between the marginalized community and Israeli authorities, with each side accusing the other of neglecting the problem.

Arab citizens, who suffer from widespread discrimination, say Israel's vaunted security forces are suspiciously powerless when it comes to combatting violence in their communities. Police say local leaders and

residents must do more to help them impose law and order.

The debate was reignited last week by the shootout in the northern town of Majd Al-Krum, which killed two brothers, Ahmed and Khalil Manaa, and a third man, Mohammed Sabea. Another Manaa brother was wounded and remains in hospital, and a fifth man is said to be on the run. The police have opened an investigation but refuse to provide any details.

"They loved everyone and everyone loved them," Aisha Manaa said as she sobbed and held a picture of her two slain sons, one of whom is survived by a wife and two small children. "How can something like this happen?"

Israel's Arab citizens make up just 20 percent of the population but account for more than half of all murder victims nationwide. At least 71 Arabs have been killed so far this year, nearly as many as in each of the preceding two years, putting it on track to be the deadliest year in at least a decade.

Last month a stray bullet killed a 21-year-old pregnant mother at a wedding outside the northern city of Haifa. Police say a shooting late on Tuesday in Jaljulia, a small Arab town in central Israel, left one person dead and another moderately wounded. Local media have aired surveillance footage from other areas showing masked gunmen firing at each other with assault rifles in broad daylight.

"Children go to school and they are terrified," Manaa said. "We are afraid during the day and during the night. It is not safe anymore."

The police say they are doing everything they can, from stepping up patrols to opening new stations in Arab communities. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said they have confiscated more than 3,500 illegal weapons and arrested more than 2,500 people on weapons charges this year alone. On Wednesday, police announced a major weapons bust in which they seized 200 guns as well as dozens of grenades and explosives.

"The Israeli police can respond to hundreds of incidents, as we do," Rosenfeld said. "But of course we have to make sure that the leaders of the different communities are speaking to the youngsters, are speaking to the local residents, are making sure that at local weddings, you don't have men that are turning up, using weapons and firing openly."

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, who oversees the police force, went further, telling a local radio station Monday that "Arab society, and I am sorry to say this, is very, very violent."

"It's connected to the culture there. A lot of disputes that end here with a lawsuit, there they pull out a knife and a gun," he said. He later walked back the remarks, tweeting that the "main responsibility" for fighting crime lies with the government and police, and describing the Arab public as "normative and law-abiding."

The Joint List of Arab political parties, which emerged as the third-largest voting bloc in the Knesset in last month's national elections, slammed Erdan's "racist" remarks, saying "the problem is not in the culture but in

the policies." It pointed to a series of large protests held in Arab towns in recent days condemning both the violence and the police response.

The mutual mistrust is rooted in the Middle East conflict. Arab citizens have close family ties to the Palestinians in the occupied territories and largely identify with the Palestinian cause. In recent years, Israeli police have tried to boost Arab recruitment, but only a small number have joined, and many in the community continue to see the Israeli security apparatus as a hostile force. Many Israelis in turn view Arabs with suspicion, and in recent elections Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other politicians branded Arab citizens as traitors or terrorists.

The two families involved in the shootout in Majd Al-Krum know each other and even visited each other's mourning tents. Mohammed Manaa, the brothers' uncle and a former head of the local council, acknowledges that the community bears some responsibility for the spike in violence. "There's no supervision, neither from the family, nor the local council, nor the government," he said.

But like many Arab citizens, he sees a wide gulf between how Israel responds to threats against the state or its Jewish citizens, and its handling of violence within Arab communities.

"The Israeli government knows every detail about everything that happens inside and outside the country," he said. "They can reach Iran, Iraq, Syria, everywhere, and they can't remove weapons from the Arab towns?"

"They are happy with this situation, this chaos," he added.

Manaa served on Majd Al-Krum's local council for more than two decades, and he would seem to be the kind of community leader who could help the police, but he says he has no idea what led to the shooting. Ali Sabea, whose nephew was killed, said the young men were all friends and that he doesn't know what caused the violence.

The Abraham Initiatives, an advocacy group that promotes coexistence between Jews and Arabs, operates in Arab communities and investigates violent incidents in order to encourage better cooperation among residents, local leaders and police. Ola Najami-Yousef, co-manager of the group's Safe Communities Initiative, said violence in Arab communities is rooted in years of discrimination and neglect by Israeli authorities.

"The lack of investment in the development and growth of Arab society in all fields, whether in construction, infrastructure, education, or economy, all this has led to a society that is very violent," she said. But she said it's unfair to hold the community fully responsible.

The police "aren't doing their job, so they blame the victims," she said. "It's not the responsibility of local leaders or Knesset members to come and collect weapons from the Arab community. That's the responsibility of the police."



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Israel's Gideon Saar challenges lengthy Netanyahu Likud rule
Israeli officials wrap up Netanyahu's pre-indictment hearing

[Foreign hybrids stubbing out Morocco's renowned cannabis](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 23:24

KETAMA, Morocco: Morocco's rugged Rif Mountains have long been renowned for their cannabis but traditional varieties are being smoked out by foreign hybrids offering higher yields and greater potency.

The local strain of marijuana, known as Beldiya, is coveted by aficionados but is gradually disappearing from the fields in the North African kingdom.

Nowadays in Ketama, a region in the heart of the northern Rif, a strain called "Critical" is king.

Hicham, a 27-year-old cannabis farmer, says that he grows Critical because "the new imported seeds give a much higher yield."

Major cannabis producers decide what to plant and “hybrid plants have become a market all on their own,” said Moroccan anthropologist Khalid Mouna, who has written a thesis on the economics of Ketama’s cannabis production.

Critical, which Mouna said comes from the Netherlands, is the latest hybrid created in laboratories in Europe or North America to be introduced to Morocco.

With names like “Pakistana,” “Amnesia” and “Gorilla,” hybrids are popular for their potency and affordability.

Critical sells for 2,500 dirhams per kilo (\$252), while Beldiya goes for up to 10,000 dirhams per kilo, local sources told AFP.

Morocco has long been a leading producer and exporter of hashish – refined cannabis resin – even though the production, sale and consumption of drugs is illegal in the country.

A quarter of hashish seizures worldwide originated from Morocco between 2013 and 2017, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

While Morocco’s cannabis cultivation is falling, the adoption of hybrids means hashish production has remained stable.

In 2003, 134,000 hectares were under cannabis cultivation, falling to 47,500 hectares by 2011 under a large official reconversion program, according to a 2015 study by the French Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT).

But modern hybrid strains produce five to 10 kilos of hashish per quintal, a traditional unit of weight equivalent to 100 kilos, compared to a single kilo for kif, as local cannabis is known.

“The substitution of hybrids for kif might explain why the production of Moroccan hashish has barely decreased,” the study said.

In Ketama, kif is part of the culture.

Producing it and smoking it are tolerated by the authorities and its cultivation provides a livelihood for 90,000 to 140,000 people in an otherwise deprived region known for its poor soil.

People in the area told AFP that it was mostly traffickers or intermediaries who bought the cannabis harvest for smuggling to Europe or other Moroccan towns.

Hicham divides his time between his cannabis field and a cafe, where he and his friends smoke joints and watch satellite TV – a distraction from unemployment, he says.

In this rural region, job prospects are rare, with one in four young people unemployed, according to official figures.

Hicham and his friends all left school early to support their families, and many have left for Europe in search of work.

Those who stay mostly work seasonally for large cannabis growers, earning about 100 dirhams per day for a month or two at a time.

Most lack the money to get set up and work for themselves.

The high yields of imported hybrid cannabis plants come at a cost however.

The strains require heavy fertilization, which can damage the soil. And their insatiable thirst threatens the region's water supplies, according to the OFDT.

Critical grows in the dry summer, requiring heavy irrigation, while Beldiya is planted in winter, depending only on rainfall.

Some locals complain that major producers enforce the planting of hybrids even in arid areas.

"The traffickers impose it and the people don't have any other choice," says Mohamed Benyahya, a local community figure.

To water their plantations, major producers install solar pumps on the roofs of their mansions.

Not far from Hicham's local cafe, a vast terraced cannabis plantation sprawls up a nearby mountain.

Rows of carefully maintained plants are watered by drip irrigation via a network of pipes connected to a reservoir.

Hybrids like Critical are notable also for high levels of THC, marijuana's main psychoactive chemical.

The adoption of hybrids explains the "rapid and significant increase in the average THC content" of seized Moroccan hashish, according to the OFDT.

For smokers, the effect compared to Beldiya is pronounced. "One makes you think, the other makes you paranoid," says Mohamed, a friend of Hicham.

"European consumers no longer want hybrid cannabis on account of its high THC levels," Mouna said.

"Traditional Moroccan cannabis remains highly coveted, particularly by advocates of legalization."

Cannabis decriminalization remains controversial in the conservative country.

Proposals to legalize cannabis have so far met fierce political opposition.

For Mouna, legalization could help regulate cannabis consumption while also preserving the more traditional and environmentally friendly Beldiya.

And, while Hicham may have switched to growing Critical, he still only smokes Beldiya. “The modern varieties,” he says, “are mediocre.”



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In Morocco, heroin addiction sweeps cannabis corridorMorocco seizes 'record' 27.3 tons of cannabis resin