

Turkish police investigate Kurdish leaders, fire water cannon at protesters

Author:

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DIYARBAKIR, Turkey, Oct 10 : Turkish police have launched criminal investigations into Kurdish lawmakers and detained scores of people, accusing them of criticizing the military's incursion into Syria on social media, state media reported.

Police also fired water cannon and detained dozens of activists in the mainly Kurdish southeastern city of Diyarbakir on Thursday at a protest against the cross-border assault.

Turkey pounded the Kurdish YPG militia in northeast Syria for a second day on Thursday, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee and killing dozens. Ankara deems the YPG a terrorist group over its links to militants who have waged an insurgency in Turkey.

Police in riot gear fired water cannon and then detained protesters at a rally in front of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) headquarters in Diyarbakir, the biggest city in the southeast. A HDP party official said police detained 25 members there, including its Diyarbakir provincial leader.

Earlier on Thursday, authorities began investigating HDP leaders and detained 21 people for criticizing the military offensive online, state-owned Anadolu news agency said.

While most of Turkey's opposition parties have backed the operation, the HDP has called for the offensive to stop, describing it as an "invasion attempt." HDP co-leader Sezai Temelli said on Wednesday the operation was an attempt by the government to drum up support amid declining public backing. Prosecutors launched an investigation against him and HDP's other co-leader, Pervin Buldan, over their remarks about the offensive, Anadolu said.

It said Temelli and Buldan were accused of "carrying out propaganda for a terrorist organization" and "openly insulting Turkey's government." Three other HDP lawmakers were being investigated over similar charges, the news agency said.

The government accuses the HDP of ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militant group and thousands of its members have been prosecuted for the same reason, including its leaders. The HDP denies such links.

Hours after the operation started on Wednesday, authorities also launched investigations against 78 individuals who criticized the offensive on social media, Anadolu said.

On Thursday, 21 people were detained in the southern province of Mardin for their social media posts. The suspects are accused of "provoking the public to hatred and animosity" and "carrying out propaganda for a terrorist organization," Anadolu said.

Late on Thursday, police detained another 11 people linked to the HDP who were protesting in central Ankara against the incursion, Anadolu reported.

Authorities launched similar investigations after each of Turkey's two previous cross-border operations into Syria. More than 300 people were detained for social media posts criticizing Turkey's offensive into northern Syria in January 2018.



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'Operation Peace Spring' continues despite international objections How will Syrian border towns react to Turkey's Operation Peace Spring?

[How will Syrian border towns react to Turkey's Operation Peace Spring?](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 01:13

ANKARA: Turkish troops and the Syrian National Army launched Operation Peace Spring in northern Syria on Wednesday afternoon.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said its aim is to "prevent the creation of a terror corridor across the southern border and to bring peace to the area." Turkish armed forces are hoping to establish a safe zone

extending 32 km into Syrian territory.

Turkish F-16 jets hit targets in Ras Al-Ain, with the Syrian-Kurdish YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) their main objective.

Ankara opposes the YPG over its ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a violent insurgency against the Turkish state for decades. But the YPG has been a key ally of the US in the fight against Daesh. This week, however, the White House announced it was withdrawing special forces from the area ahead of the Turkish operation.

Now the big question is how residents of the Syrian border towns of Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ain, which will be among the first targets, will react.

The YPG captured Tal Abyad – an Arab-majority town located to the north of Raqqa near the Turkish border – from Daesh in 2015 by the YPG. The fact that the area is predominantly Arab means that the first phase of the operation there is more likely to meet with the residents' approval, according to experts.

The Tal Abyad district belongs to Kurdish canton of Kobane, but is populated by a number of different tribes, in long-established separate zones. The Kurdish minority is settled in the western part of the area.

Four years ago, Amnesty International claimed that the YPG was conducting an ethnic-cleansing campaign against Arabs in some villages of Tal Abyad, while there are still complaints from the local Arabs that the YPG is trying to "Kurdify" the residents through school curricula and the confiscation of properties.

Ammar Hamou, a Jordan-based Syrian journalist, said that people to the east of the Euphrates are divided in their opinions of the operation, but that the majority of Arabs support it.

FASTFACT

Turkish armed forces are hoping to establish a safe zone extending 32 km into Syrian territory.

"As for how the people see the Free Army and Turkey, unfortunately, many consider Turkey's move an occupation and are afraid of the ruthless military operation, especially since there was a bad experience in Afrin," he told Arab News, referring to the ongoing Operation Olive Branch, conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army in Syria's majority-Kurdish Afrin district.

According to Hamou, if Turkey is able to ensure that there are no human-rights violations by its forces or the Syrian National Army, then locals may accept the process.

"The success of the safe zone is Turkey's responsibility, and it is a difficult test," he said. "Returning refugees from the east of the Euphrates to the region will be welcomed by the people, but the return of Syrians from other areas such as Homs and Damascus is a demographic change."

Ankara's draft plan for a construction project in the area is focused on building 200,000 houses in the safe zone in northeast Syria, which includes Tal Abyad, in order to settle around 1 million Syrian refugees who are currently hosted in Turkish territories.

There is a significant number of Arab refugees from Tal Abyad currently living in Turkey and they are eager to return to their homeland with the help of Ankara's operation. The tribal system still predominates among the Arab communities in the zone, with tribal leaders maintaining a level of authority over the residents.

Galip Dalay, visiting scholar at the University of Oxford, said the Arab tribes in Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ain will likely be calculating which side is most likely to win.

"Some local groups who were previously cooperating with the YPG could now side with the Turks, if they think the Turkish army will (prevail). Their pragmatic reasoning will be determinant," he told Arab News.

In Jays, the main tribe in Tal Abyad, the Bou Assaf clan works closely with the YPG, while two other clans – Jamilah and Bou Jarada – oppose it. There are also a number of Turkmen tribes, who, obviously, are in favor of Turkey. The symbolic timing of the operation is also telling: On Oct. 9, 1998, Syria put the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, on a plane to Moscow, and he was arrested in Kenya a year later.

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Program at the Washington Institute, said that Turkish troops are deliberately targeting a narrow belt along the Syrian border stretching from Tal Abyad to Ras Al-Ayn, as it is an Arab-majority area. In other words, he said, this is not a Turkish invasion of major Kurdish areas, but a Turkish invasion of Arab areas controlled by Kurds. He added that the "face" of the Turkish incursion will have an Arab component, consisting mainly of Arabs from the area.

"Therefore, Turkish troops will be welcomed more than they would be if they went into Kobane or Kurdish-majority areas along the border," he said. "Some of the residents of this Arab area were driven out when Daesh took over, and many others were driven out when YPG took control, and they were all forced into Turkey."



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Saudi Arabia and UAE condemn 'Turkish aggression' in Syria
Turkish forces launch operation against Kurds in Syria

[Iranian women to attend football match freely for first time in decades](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 01:05

TEHRAN: Thousands of Iranian women fans are to attend a football match freely on Thursday for the first time in decades, after FIFA threatened to suspend the country over its controversial male-only policy.

The Islamic republic has barred female spectators from football and other stadiums for around 40 years, with clerics arguing they must be shielded from the masculine atmosphere and sight of semi-clad men.

World football's governing body FIFA ordered Iran last month to allow women access to stadiums without restriction and in numbers determined by demand

for tickets.

The directive came after a fan dubbed “Blue Girl” died after setting herself on fire in fear of being jailed for dressing up as a boy to attend a match.

Women were quick to get their hands on tickets to attend Iran’s 2022 World Cup qualifier against Cambodia at Tehran’s Azadi Stadium on Thursday.

The first batch sold out in less than an hour, and additional seats were also snapped up in short order, state media said.

The Sports Ministry said the 100,000-capacity stadium – whose name means “Freedom” in Farsi – was ready to host even more women.

One of the 3,500 women to have secured a ticket was Raha Poorbakhsh, a football journalist.

“I still can’t believe this is going to happen because after all these years of working in this field, watching everything on television, now I can experience everything in person,” she told AFP.

But Poorbakhsh said she was aware of many other women without tickets.

There have been rare occasions in recent years when Iranian women have been allowed to watch matches, but this time they were free to buy their own tickets, albeit a set number.

Using the hashtag #WakeUpFifa, women have taken to social media to demand more tickets.

While women have already taken up their entire allocation, only 2,500 men have so far purchased electronic tickets for the more than 70,000 seats available to them, the ISNA news agency reported.

Those lucky enough to attend will be segregated from men and watched over by 150 female police officers.

People on the streets of Tehran said they supported the decision to allow women into stadiums.

“I would like there to be freedom for women, like men, to go freely and even sit side by side without any restrictions, like other countries,” said a woman who gave her name only as Hasti.

Nader Fathi, who runs a clothing business, said the presence of women could improve the atmosphere in stadiums.

But he said “they will regret it” if they are exposed to “really bad swear words” and “bad behavior.”

The bumpy road Iranian women have traveled in order to gain free access to stadiums has not been without tragedy.

Sahar Khodayari died last month after setting herself ablaze outside a court

in fear of being jailed for attending a match.

Dubbed “blue girl” because of the colors of the club she supported – Tehran giants Esteghlal FC – she had reportedly been detained last year when trying to enter a stadium dressed as a boy.

Her death sparked an outcry, with many calling for Iran to be banned and matches boycotted.

The judiciary dismissed reports she had been told she would be jailed, and Khodayari’s father said she did not “sacrifice” herself for any cause.

Foreign pressure

Ahead of Qatar 2022, FIFA has pressed Iran to allow women to attend qualifiers.

But Iran denied its decision to allow women into Thursday’s match was a result of “foreign pressure.”

“The presence of #women in stadiums is due to the internal social demands and government’s support of those demands,” government spokesman Ali Rabiei tweeted.

The ban on women in stadiums is not written into law or regulations, but it has been strictly enforced.

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, women have only had rare access to stadiums in Iran.

About 20 Irish women attended a World Cup qualifier in 2001, and four years later a few dozen Iranian women watched the national team take on Bahrain.

In October, as many as 100 “handpicked” Iranian women watched a friendly against Bolivia.

The day after, the prosecutor general warned there would be no repeat, saying it would “lead to sin.”

Then in November, a select group of about 850 women attended a match between Esteghlal’s Tehran rivals, Persepolis FC, and Japan’s Kashima Antlers.

The issue continues to be deeply divisive in Iran.

Reformists have welcomed the latest move, but conservatives have come out strongly against it.

The Donya-e-Eqtasad financial newspaper called it “a step to weaken a taboo and also free Iran’s football of the looming shadow of FIFA’s punishment.”

But the ultra-conservative Kayhan daily said women were more concerned about economic issues.



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Iranian female football fan dies after setting herself on fire
Iranian FA warned new law is putting country's Asian Cup place at risk

[Calm returns to Iraq, as US condemns violence](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 01:07

BAGHDAD: Calm prevailed in Iraq on Wednesday after a week of anti-government protests left dozens dead, prompting the US to call on the country's government to exercise "maximum restraint."

In Baghdad – the second most populous Arab capital – normal life has gradually resumed since Tuesday. Traffic has again clogged the main roads of the sprawling city of 9 million inhabitants. Students have returned to schools, whose reopening was disrupted by the violence.

On Tuesday, security restrictions were lifted around Baghdad's Green Zone, where government offices and embassies are based.

Iraq descended into violence last week as protests that began with demands for an end to rampant corruption and chronic unemployment escalated with calls for a complete overhaul of the political system.

The demonstrations were unprecedented because of their apparent spontaneity and independence in a deeply politicized society.

Protesters were met with tear gas and live fire. On Sunday night scenes of chaos engulfed Sadr City, the Baghdad stronghold of influential Shiite leader Moqtada Al-Sadr, who called for the government to resign.

At least 13 demonstrators died in Sadr City, where the military recognized "excessive force outside the rules of engagement" had been used.

According to official figures, the week of violence in Baghdad and across southern Iraq killed more than 100 people, mostly protesters, with more than 6,000 others wounded.

Uncertainty over the identify of the perpetrators persists, with authorities blaming "unidentified snipers."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned the violence on Tuesday.

During a call with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi, Pompeo said "those who violated human rights should be held accountable," the State Department said in a statement.

"The secretary lamented the tragic loss of life over the past few days and urged the Iraqi government to exercise maximum restraint.

"Pompeo reiterated that peaceful public demonstrations are a fundamental element of all democracies, and emphasized that there is no place for violence in demonstrations, either by security forces or protesters." While calm has returned to the country, uninterrupted internet access has not.

Cybersecurity NGO NetBlocks blamed the state for imposing "a near-total telecommunication shutdown in most regions, severely limiting press coverage and transparency around the ongoing crisis."

For a week internet access has been progressively limited. First access to certain social media sites disappeared, followed by internet connections for telephones, computers and even virtual private network (VPN) applications.

Since Tuesday, connection has intermittently returned to Baghdad and the south of the country. During these short reconnections, social media sites were accessible via a VPN connection, and images of protesters killed during marches began to be shared.

On Wednesday, the connection remained unreliable. Providers told customers they were unable to provide a timetable for a return to uninterrupted

service, information on restrictions, or any other details.

Iraqi authorities have not commented on the restrictions, which according to NetBlocks affected three quarters of the country. In the north, the autonomous Kurdish region is unaffected.

The tentative calm returning to Baghdad comes ahead of Arbaeen, the massive pilgrimage this month that sees millions of Muslims walk to the holy city of Karbala, south of Baghdad.

Nearly 2 million came last year from neighboring Iran, which has urged citizens to delay their travel into Iraq in light of the protest violence.

Its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Monday “enemies” were trying to drive a wedge between Tehran and Baghdad, in an apparent allusion to the protests.

The demonstrations and accompanying violence have created a political crisis in a country torn between its two main allies – Iran and the US.

With political rivals accusing each other of allegiance to foreign powers, President Barham Saleh called on Monday for “sons of the same country” to put an end to the “discord.”

He called for a “national, all-encompassing and frank dialogue ... without foreign interference.”



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Feared no more: Iraq protesters challenge factions' reign of terror
How political forces fueled the spread of Iraq protests

Lebanese military veterans protest nonpayment of demobbed soldiers

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 00:46

BEIRUT: Large numbers of former Lebanese soldiers took to the streets early on Wednesday to demonstrate outside the Ministry of Finance's VAT building in Beirut.

The retired servicemen and women were protesting against the government's austerity measures – including cuts to medical aid and other benefits – and delays to end-of-service payments.

The protesters blocked the entrance to the building – preventing some employees from entering, raised the Lebanese flag, and held Lebanese Army banners with the phrase “Loyal people have died, 0 soldier,” written on them.

Beshara, a retired soldier, carried the battery that regulates his heartbeat and said that he can only survive for a few hours without it, but that he took the risk of joining the demonstration to protest against nonpayment of his medical aid and his children's school tuition fees.

Brig. Gen. Sami El-Rammah, a spokesman for the protesters, said the sit-in was staged to “protest arbitrary measures in paying the dues of retired soldiers, which are their right – as prescribed by the army – not a courtesy.

“The Ministry of Finance deals with pensioners by not paying their pensions and school aid, noting that the funds have already been listed,” he continued. “How can it make sense not to pay the salaries of pensioners who were demobilized over 9 months ago? How will these people live without salaries?”

He warned: “If officials continue this injustice, they will be surprised by our reaction.”

Retired Brig. Gen. Andre Abu Ma'shar stressed that it was a peaceful demonstration. “There will be no roads blocked nor tires set on fire,” he said.

“The Lebanese people as a whole are suffering as the veterans are. The authorities' performance is totally unacceptable.”

Retired Brig. Gen. George Nader said, "Our fight not only concerns retirees, but also soldiers on active duty, as huge cuts have been made in their salaries."

One female employee in the ministry tried to use her car to enter the building by force, resulting in a heated argument with protesters.

Later, divisions emerged between the protesters themselves; some wanted to end the sit-in and some wanted to proceed to cut off the busy road between the Palace of Justice and the neighborhood of Ashrafyeh. A few protesters lay down in the middle of that road, but it was quickly reopened.

In a placatory statement, the Ministry of Finance said that it fully understood the motives of retired soldiers as well as retired civil servants.

When the 2019 budget was prepared, pensions were estimated at a total of L.L. 450 billion (\$300 million), however after news emerged of the government's intention to freeze early retirement, a huge number of soldiers and military employees filed for their end-of-service benefits, which resulted in extra expenses of L.L. 540 billion (\$360 million).

This prompted the ministry to demand an amendment to the budget to provide additional credit to the unexpected increase in expenses, it claimed, adding that retirees "will soon receive their payments."

According to the official website of the Lebanese Army Command, there are 56,000 personnel in active service, 54,000 of them in the army, 1,000 in the air force, and 1,000 in the navy.

In 2018, the Lebanese army budget was estimated at \$2.5 billion. However, the 2019 budget introduced major cuts, including items that are considered essential, such as fuel, covert action expenses, hardware, buildings, and more.

In Lebanon the retirement age is 58 for army officers and 52 for soldiers and regular army personnel. The low retirement age is considered necessary because of the physical and mental demands of their jobs, and the need to recruit young soldiers.

Lebanon is facing a mounting economic crisis due to a sharp decline in investments and income, an equally sharp increase in bankruptcy and unemployment, accusations of rampant corruption, and increasing uncertainty about the country's future.



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