

Syria students say militants waging war on their future

Author:

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IDLIB: In Syria's militant-controlled Idlib province, Mudar Darwish and fellow medical students clutched banners and chanted against the closure of their university.

"Our future is being wasted because of unfair decisions against our university," Darwish told the crowd gathered in the northwestern region.

"We won't allow it," said the 28-year-old with a short beard, who has been protesting against the closure of his university in the town of Maaret Al-Noman.

Militants dominating Idlib have come under increased criticism in recent weeks after they shut down a series of universities in their stronghold.

Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a group led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, has closed down a dozen universities since January, in a bid to bring them under its control.

The so-called Salvation Government, an HTS-dominated body administering Idlib and its eponymous capital, said the move serves to regulate higher education.

The degrees offered by Idlib's universities, including the Maaret Al-Noman university, are not recognized abroad, but they can facilitate employment within the province.

Darwish said the closure of the Maaret Al-Noman university will deal a blow to "the future of 1,700 students." The 28-year-old student suggested the militant administration in Idlib was trying to turn the universities into a cash cow.

"We used to pay a tuition of no more than \$300 and we can't afford to pay \$1,800 for universities" accredited by HTS, he said.

Reda Omari, a 23-year-old nursing student, expressed a similar sentiment.

"The Government of Salvation's universities are commercial enterprises," said the young man, wearing a leather jacket and his hair gelled back.

"They're just 'uni for money'," he said. Idlib is the last major region outside government control in northwest Syria. HTS took administrative control of the whole of the Idlib region in January, after overpowering smaller factions that are backed by Turkey.

As it expands in the province, so does hostility toward its iron-fisted rule, especially as it moves to tighten its hold on universities previously outside

its control.

After two weeks of rallies in Maaret Al-Noman, students moved their protest to Idlib city, where they gathered around the so-called Council of Higher Education, a body linked to the Salvation Government.

They raised banners, chanted slogans against the council's president and blocked access to its main headquarters. Militants quickly swept in to curb protests.

After the first rally, HTS erected checkpoints to prevent more students from Maaret Al-Noman and the nearby town of Ariha from joining demonstrations.

They threatened to arrest students if demonstrators did not disperse.

Majdi Al-Husni, the head of the Council of Higher Education, said he understands why students are angry but stressed the need for uniformity across Idlib's educational sector.

He said the council aims to "supervise" the educational sector and harmonize the curriculum to ensure "quality education" in regions controlled by HTS.

"University programs don't have to be 100 percent identical, but there has to be some consensus," he told AFP.

He said the Salvation Government has granted accreditation to only eight universities.

"There are more than 13 educational institutions operating without the oversight of the Council of Higher Education ... on a territory of barely 10,000 sq. km," Husni added.

"This reflects badly on the reputation of higher education in the region," he said.

Protests in Maaret Al-Noman have largely fizzled out in recent days but students and teachers continued to express anger at HTS.

In a sign of defiance, staff members at the faculty of medicine at the Maaret Al-Noman university started teaching on the street outside campus.

Photos shared on social media networks showed students sitting in rows on plastic chairs, facing a white-haired man dressed in a medical gown.

The instructor used the sidewalk as a podium. Behind him, the university's facade is visible, including Qur'anic verses painted on its walls.

Heavy government shelling on the town, however, has disrupted these open-air classes.

Since September, Idlib has been protected from a massive regime offensive by a cease-fire deal brokered by regime ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

But sporadic regime bombardment has continued to hit the region, and hundreds

of missiles have rained down on Maaret Al-Noman in recent weeks.

With the closure of the university, “many young people will give up their studies to stay at home or look for work,” fellow student Mohammed Al-Shahud said.

“Our future is being thrown away,” he said.



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Idlib extremists kill 20 Syria govt loyalists in 3 daysA battle of nerves for the control of Idlib city

[‘Racist’ candidate should be barred from Israel polls: Attorney general](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-03-06 22:59

JERUSALEM: A candidate for an extreme-right party that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought to boost ahead of April elections should be

disqualified over "racist" remarks, the attorney general has said.

Israel's elections committee will begin discussing petitions to bar candidates on Wednesday.

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit said late Tuesday that recent remarks by Michael Ben-Ari of the Jewish Power party amount to "incitement to racism" against Israeli Arabs, who constitute around 17.5 percent of the population.

Ben-Ari has described Israeli Arabs as "treacherous and murderous," Mandelblit said.

A decision to disqualify him would be appealed to the country's supreme court, which would have the final word.

"Ben-Ari is inciting on an ethnic-nationalistic basis against the Arab population" and "calling for a violent renunciation of the Arab population's rights," Mandelblit said.

Mandelblit's position was submitted to the central elections committee in response to a petition to have Jewish Power candidates disqualified from taking part in the April 9 vote.

The committee will discuss requests to disqualify candidates from Wednesday to Sunday.

Ben-Ari and others are also calling for the disqualification of lists from Arab parties over their alleged lack of loyalty to Israel and support of "terror" against it.

Jewish Power are followers of late racist rabbi Meir Kahane, whose Kach movement was labelled a terrorist organization by Israel, the US and the EU.

Hoping to secure as many right-wing seats as possible in the next parliament, Netanyahu brokered a deal that saw Jewish Power join with two far-right parties to create a single electoral list.

Ben-Ari, who was a member of Parliament from 2009-2013, was given fifth place on the list.

Netanyahu has faced harsh criticism over the deal, with many accusing him of easing the path for "racists" to make it into Parliament.

There is also a bid to disqualify the second Jewish Power candidate, Itamar Ben-Gvir over "racist" comments but Mandelblit said his statements were not sufficient to bar him.

Jewish Power lashed out at Mandelblit's recommendation against Ben-Ari, accusing him of "hypocrisy" for not recommending to disqualify the Arab lists and claiming he was attempting to "run Israel."

Jewish Power expressed hope the committee would not accept Mandelblit's position, saying the attorney general had been misled "with partial

recordings and distortions of interviews.”



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[Turkey-US relations remain fraught](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-03-06 22:38

ANKARA: Tensions between the US and Turkey will continue in the near future, with the latest developments “ringing the alarm bell,” experts warn.

Since October 2018, when a Turkish court permitted Pastor Andrew Brunson to

return to the US after a two-year sentence, relations have still not reached their optimal level.

Despite high-level talks over recent weeks, Washington has showed little inclination to accept Ankara's demand to establish a 32-km safe zone under Turkish control on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River in Syria after the US announced its withdrawal from the area.

The negotiations have not yet led to an agreement and Turkish President Erdogan recently criticized the US over its delay after Turkey demanded US support for the withdrawal of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia from the region.

However, in January, Trump threatened to "devastate" the Turkish economy if the country attacked Kurdish forces supported by the US against Daesh, despite Turkey's strong objections.

The recent visit of US First Lady Melania Trump to a Gulen-movement-linked charter school in Oklahoma on Tuesday also sparked intense debate in Turkey and is likely to further antagonize relations between the two allies.

Ankara believes that the Gulen movement masterminded a failed coup attempt in the country in 2016, and Turkey formally requested the extradition of its US-based leader Fethullah Gulen three years ago.

From a bilateral trade perspective, Washington announced on Monday its plan to remove Turkey from its list of countries with duty-free access, claiming that Turkey "is sufficiently economically developed." The preferential trade treatment has allowed some exports to enter the US on a duty-free basis.

However, Turkey's weakening economy, set against the backdrop of a steep drop in the Turkish currency, is likely to be undermined by this decision. Turkey was the fifth-largest supplier to the US with a share of 8.2 percent of goods. The US imported about \$20.9 billion of goods under this preferential scheme in the first 11 months of 2018, according to official figures.

The escalatory moves did not stop there. On Tuesday, top US General Curtis Scaparrotti said that the US should not sell F-35 fighter jets to Turkey, a NATO ally, if Ankara purchases the Russian S-400 long-range air defense system.

Ankara has a critical place in the F-35 program as some parts of the jets are built in Turkey. Turkey had refused to meet the Feb. 15 deadline set by the US to cancel the purchase of the S-400 system.

The US had been trying to convince Turkey to buy the Patriot system instead, which is compatible with the NATO defense system. Washington had warned Turkey over possible US sanctions against those who engage in business ties with the Russian defense industry if the purchase was made.

Ali Cinar, a US-based foreign policy expert, said that the lack of trust between Turkey and Washington is likely to continue in 2019, especially in the light of the S-400 issue.

"I don't expect further deterioration. However, we will see ups and downs in the relationship. An unstable Turkey does not benefit the strategic interests of the US and Turkey, nor does it serve peace and stability in a region already devastated by volatility," he told Arab News.

He thinks that the partnership between the US and the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia will further strain ties.

But according to Cinar, the two countries do not have the luxury of losing their friendship, and high-level meetings between American and Turkish officials should serve as an opportunity to repair it.

David Satterfield, who has held top posts at US missions in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon, was recently appointed by the White House as the US ambassador in Ankara. The post has been vacant since October 2017 when the former American ambassador left the country amid a visa crisis between Washington and Ankara.

According to Mehmet Ali Tugtan, an expert on transatlantic relations from Istanbul Bilgi University, the main controversy arises from Turkey being allied to two great powers who are engaged in strategic rivalry.

"At some point, you reach the limits of playing one side against the other," he told Arab News.

"If Turkey acquires both S-400s and F-35s, she would possess area denial capability to both Russia and the US – not to mention her European allies," Tugtan said. "In F-35 she would also possess a formidable power projection capability against her regional neighbors."

Tugtan said that the US does not want Turkey to have these capabilities at a time when the alliance between the two countries is in doubt.

"So, the typical US approach in cases like these is a combination of positive gestures, such as the Patriot offer, threats like denying the F-35s, sanctions like the removal from the preferential trade regime and symbolic warnings like the Melania Trumps visit," he said.

"Although there is no immediate threat of a flare-up, Turkish-US relations are unlikely to rise above this low ebb in the foreseeable future," Tugtan said.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, thinks that recent developments in US-Turkey relations indicate a perfect storm similar to the one witnessed last summer.

"If short-termism prevails over long-term strategic thinking, the vulnerability of US-Turkey relations, emanating from the lack of a relevant strategic framework, mutual distrust and ownership problem could crystallize," he told Arab News.

For Unluhisarcikli, coinciding with weakening links between the EU and Turkey, further deterioration of relations with the US could put Turkey on a

path away from the West.

“This situation is not easily reversible unless there is a strong political will on both sides to do so,” he said.



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Turkey tells US not to leave power vacuum in Syria withdrawalAction in east of Euphrates seen as a way to implement US-Turkey deal

[Iran lawyer convicted after defending women protesters](#)

Author:

By JON GAMBRELL | AP

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Wed, 2019-03-06 15:05

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates: A prominent human rights lawyer in Iran who defended protesters against the Islamic Republic's mandatory headscarves for women has been convicted and faces years in prison, an activist group said Wednesday.

The conviction of Nasrin Sotoudeh, who previously served three years in prison for her work, underlines the limits of challenging Iran's theocracy as it faces economic pressure exacerbated by the US pulling out of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

It also highlights the limits of Iran's civilian government as well, as the administration of President Hassan Rouhani and others have signaled an easing of their concern over the mandatory hijab.

It shows "the insecurity the regime has to any peaceful challenge," said Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran, which reported Sotoudeh's conviction. "It knows a large segment of the country . are fed up with the hijab laws."

Sotoudeh, 55, was convicted in absentia after she refused to attend the trial before Tehran's Revolutionary Court as she was unable to select her own counsel, Ghaemi said. The Revolutionary Court conducts closed-door hearings over alleged threats to Iran's government.

The charges range from her membership to a human rights group to "encouraging corruption and prostitution." That suggests her detention in part relates to her defense of women who protested the mandatory hijab.

Sotoudeh's conviction was not immediately reported by Iranian state-run media. Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

The Center for Human Rights in Iran relied on information about Sotoudeh's case provided by her husband Reza Khandan, who separately faces a six-year prison sentence over providing updates on her case on Facebook, Ghaemi said. Sotoudeh received the awarded the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Union in 2012. Her previous clients also include Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi.

One of Sotoudeh's clients in the hijab protests received a 20-year prison sentence, showing the sensitivity authorities felt about the case. Ghaemi said he believes Iran's theocracy connects the hijab protests to the nationwide economic protests that happened around the same time at the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018.

"It is part of the same pattern of wanting to put an end to any peaceful protest on the street," he said.

The hijab and chador – the flowing, all-encompassing robe for women – have long been parts of Persian culture. They became political symbols in 1936, when Iran's pro-Western ruler Reza Shah Pahlavi banned the garments amid his efforts to rapidly modernize Iran. The ban became a source of humiliation for some pious Muslim women in the country.

As the 1979 Islamic Revolution took hold, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered female civil servants to wear the chador. At first, thousands of women protested the decision in Tehran and Khomeini later said officials should not insult women who chose not to wear it – though he also called the chador "the flag of the revolution."

The hijab and loose-fitting clothing later became mandatory for all women in Iran.

In Tehran today, some fashionable young women wear tighter clothes with a scarf loosely covering their head, technically meeting the requirements of the law while drawing the ire of conservatives.

In December 2017, Tehran's police said they would no longer arrest women for not observing the Islamic dress code as video clips of women choosing not to wear hijabs and walking the streets with their heads uncovered spread across social media.

Protests followed, including a much-circulated image of a woman atop a junction box at an intersection of Tehran's famed Enghelab, or "Revolution," Street, waving her white hijab as if it was a flag.



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Lavrov: Russia seeks to strengthen relations with Gulf

Wed, 2019-03-06 13:02

DUBAI: Russia aims to strengthen relations with Gulf countries, the country's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in Kuwait on Wednesday.

"Russia and Saudi Arabia seek to fight terrorism in Syria," Lavrov said during a joint press conference with Kuwaiti FM Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah, adding that, "Saudi Arabia sees need in creating a constitutional committee in Syria."

"The international community ties aid to Syria with a political solution to the crisis," he said.

Kuwait FM Al-Sabah said the return of Syria to the Arab community "makes us happy and we seek a speedy political solution."

Lavrov added that Russia is eager to hear more details about the US plan for peace in the region and is in communication with US to ease any further escalation in Syria.

The Russian foreign minister is currently on a tour of Gulf states.



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against Tottenham, Marco Reus tells Borussia Dortmund teammates