

# Wintry weather and diplomacy cool down Gaza border protests

Author:

Thu, 2018-11-08 22:43

GAZA: A seasonal shift in the weather and intensified international diplomacy are prompting Palestinians mounting protests along Gaza's border with Israel to rethink their tactics.

Since the demonstrations started more than seven months ago, protesters routinely made attempts to breach Israel's frontier fence and launched incendiary balloons and kites to burn forests and crops inside Israel.

Israeli forces have killed more than 219 Palestinians at the border protests, according to Gazan officials. An Israeli soldier was also killed by a Palestinian sniper.

The protests draw tens of thousands of people after Muslim prayers on Fridays. But last week was the quietest so far, according to journalists who regularly cover the demonstrations.

Smoke from burning tires wafting toward Israel provided a measure of cover for Palestinian youngsters approaching the barrier, but a wintry change in wind direction sent the thick black clouds back into Gaza and Israeli tear gas deeper into the crowd of protesters, forcing their retreat.

Stepped-up efforts by Egypt to craft a long-term cease-fire between Hamas and Israel that could ease an Israeli blockade are also dampening the protests.

One official familiar with the talks said a cease-fire would include a gradual end to the rallies, or an agreement to hold them far from the fence, as well as an easing of Israeli restrictions on the movement of goods and people at the border.

Organizers have made clear the protests would continue until the long-standing Israeli border restrictions were lifted. Dubbed the "Great March of Return," the campaign demands the rights to lands Palestinian families fled or were driven from during fighting around Israel's founding in 1948.

One protester, wearing a black mask, said demonstrators were weighing up new ways to confront the Israeli military now that seasonal rains have begun.

"We may use fire crackers, noisy horns and we will try to cut through the fence. We will surprise them with things we will not make public now," said the 23-year-old, who gave his name only as Hakim.

One idea, he said, was to build a giant slingshot to launch rocks across the barbed wire barrier.

A statement by a Palestinian group which claimed responsibility for balloon

launchings said it would allow time for diplomacy to work before escalating action again.

“We will give a chance for an agreement to be reached that will ease the bitterness of the blockade imposed on our people,” said the Sons of Zwary group. The group was named after a Hamas engineer killed in Tunisia in an alleged Israeli assassination.

In the meantime, it said, it was preparing hundreds of incendiary devices.

Daoud Shehab, of the National Committee supervising the protests, said five assembly areas were being prepared for winter.

“We are placing plastic sheeting to cover large areas and we are also going to pave the ground where people usually gather,” he said.

Earlier Gaza’s Interior Ministry said Egyptian naval forces fired on a Palestinian fishing boat and killed a fisherman, but an Egyptian military source denied the report.

Egypt’s navy has in the past shot at Gazans whom it has accused of crossing the maritime border. There was no initial information on whether the fishing boat had crossed into Egyptian waters.

Wednesday’s incident took place off the coast after dark near the southern border town of Rafah, said Gaza’s Interior Ministry, which is run by officials loyal to Hamas.

“Egyptian naval vessels fired toward a Palestinian fishing boat near the southern sea border of Gaza Strip which led to the death of Mustafa Abu Odah, 30,” the ministry statement said.

In Cairo, an Egyptian military source denied the report.



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Frenchman accused of smuggling guns from Gaza to West Bank 'tricked' Gaza fisherman killed at sea by Egyptian fire: union

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## [Libya commander Haftar visits Russia ahead of conference](#)

Author:

Thu, 2018-11-08 21:58

MOSCOW: Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar in Moscow on Wednesday, Russian media reported, signalling Kremlin support ahead of a conference aimed at settling the north African country's years of strife.

Russia's military has long shown backing for the powerful Libyan commander, who dominates eastern Libya.

He has visited Russia before, and last year the Russian Defense Ministry hosted him aboard its sole aircraft carrier.

Shoigu and Haftar discussed the Libyan crisis and the security situation in the Middle East and North Africa, Russian news agencies said, citing a defense ministry statement, without giving details.

Italy will host an international conference on Libya on Monday and Tuesday, which Haftar will attend, Italy has said.

Haftar's office said the meeting in Moscow had covered ways to end Libya's crisis and the fight against terrorism.

Russia is expected to send high-level representatives to the Palermo meeting.

The international community formally backs the transitional government in Tripoli, but Egypt and the UAE have lent Haftar support and European states including France courted Haftar as his power grew.

UN efforts to stabilize Libya have long been undercut by the divergent agendas of foreign powers.

France has vied for influence with Italy, which has sought to protect its oil and gas interests and stem the flow of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, by building ties in Tripoli.

In recent weeks, Western powers and the UN have quietly stopped talking about the election in December, without formally declaring it dead.

In May, France had persuaded major players in the North African country to verbally agree to elections on Dec. 10 as a way of ending repeated rounds of bloodshed between competing factions.

But weeks of fighting between rival militias in Tripoli and deadlock between rump parliaments in Tripoli and the east has made that goal unrealistic, Western officials argue.

Shelving the plans for presidential and parliamentary elections is the latest setback for Western powers.

Instead of pushing for a vote as a short-term goal, UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salame was focusing in a briefing to the UN Security Council on Thursday on staging a national conference next year and fixing the economy, diplomats said.

The conference would aim to forge consensus in a country divided between hundreds of armed groups controlling mostly minimal territory, towns, tribes and regions.

Salame plans to push again for economic reforms to end a system benefiting armed groups that have access to cheap dollars due to their power over banks.

Salame is the sixth UN special envoy for Libya since 2011.

Diplomats say delayed reforms introduced in Tripoli in September, including a fee on purchases of foreign currency, can only partially ease Libya's economic woes as long as the central bank remains divided and predatory factions retain their positions.

The reforms have so far done little to improve conditions for ordinary Libyans hit by steep inflation and a cash crisis linked to the fall of the dinar on the black market.

For the militias, the sources said Salame would outline a new "security arrangement" for Tripoli aimed at depriving them of control of key sites and integrating their members into regular forces – something that has proved elusive in the past.

Talks to unify rival camps launched in September 2017, shortly after Salame took up his post, ground to a halt after one month with Haftar's role a key sticking point. Many in western Libya oppose him, fearing he could use the position to seize power.

Haftar's Libyan National Army says it is committed to the election process, in which Haftar himself is a possible candidate.



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Phase two development of Libya's Bahr Essalam gas field to finish by end 2018: NOCFive dead in suspected Daesh attack in central Libya

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## Houthi claims of UAE airport drone attacks were 'propaganda fabrications'

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LONDON: Houthi militia claims that they attacked UAE airports with drones are probably "propaganda fabrications," according to a [report from investigative website Bellingcat](#).

The alleged attacks had been used by the Iran-backed Houthis as a tool to give the impression they had the capability of attacking strategic sites inside the Emirates, the report by risk consultant Khalil Dewan said.

In July and August, Houthi media claimed that Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports had been targeted by their forces with Sammad-3 drones. The claims, which were denied by the UAE, were also found to be baseless by the Bellingcat investigation.

The report also implicated Iran in arming the Houthis, citing the militia's use of Hudhuh-1, Qasef-1 and Sammad unmanned craft, all of which "resemble Iranian-made drones."

"The Houthi's primary method (of propaganda) is to show they have the capability to strike the UAE," the report said.

On both occasions of the alleged attacks, flights continued to operate unaffected – despite claims by the Houthis of flights redirecting from Abu Dhabi to Dubai.

The UAE General Civil Aviation Authority at the time denied the claims and said air traffic was operating as usual.

The Bellingcat report cited the lack of mobile footage captured by passengers of disruptions as they traveled through the airports as evidence that the attack did not take place.

"The disruption that occurred and the scale of it would not suggest that a lethal attack occurred," the report said.

The report also debunked Houthi claims that drone attacks had been carried out in Saudi Arabia.

Charts and infographics released by the militia list alleged drone operations in the Kingdom between December 2017 and July 2018, as well as the type of drones supposedly deployed.

While the drones may have entered Saudi Arabian airspace, the Bellingcat report said it was unlikely the drones actually carried out strikes.

On April 11, Saudi Arabia's air defense systems downed two Houthi drones in the south at Abha International Airport and Jazan. According to Arab Coalition spokesman, Col. Turki Al-Maliki, an "unidentified body" flew toward Abha International Airport but was destroyed.

Al-Maliki confirmed the remnants appeared to be those of a Houthi drone. On the same day in Jazan, Saudi defense forces destroyed another Houthi drone

and according to Al-Maliki, the drone was identical to the remnants of the one downed at Abha International Airport. According to a [Conflict Armament Research report](#), the use of drones shows the Houthis' ability to use "low-cost technology" against the Arab coalition's "sophisticated military assets," but that the use of the Iranian-designed Qasef-1 drones supports the claim that Iran is arming the Houthis in Yemen.



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## [Two Iraq ministers risk sack over Saddam-era posts](#)

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BAGHDAD: Two ministers approved by Iraq's parliament may lose their jobs before the rest of cabinet is agreed, officials said Thursday, after a commission found they were members of Saddam Hussein's regime.

The Accountability and Justice Commission is responsible for the policy of "de-Baathification," or ensuring no Saddam-era officials or senior members of his Baath party play a role in Iraq's government.

Commission spokesman Fares Abdul Sattar said that the body had sent a letter to parliament over two nominees to the 22-minister government – a third of which has yet to be confirmed by parliament.

"Two names will be subject to procedures by the Accountability and Justice Commission," Abdul Sattar said, without specifying who.

A parliamentary source said that the endangered officials were Minister of Youth and Sports Ahmad Al-Obeidi and Minister of Communications Naim Al-Rubaye, who were only approved by lawmakers last month.

If sacked, it would be the first time the policy of "de-Baathification" unseats a minister confirmed by parliament since the 2003 ouster of Saddam by a US-led invasion.

Rubaye was reportedly a member of the intelligence services and a mid-level Baath party official, said a security source, but it was unclear what role Obeidi had.

Both received parliament's vote of confidence on October 25 along with 12 other ministers, including those in charge of finance, foreign affairs, and oil.

Due to deep divisions, the remaining eight portfolios, including the interior and defense ministers, have not been put to a vote.

Parliament has met twice since then, but a confirmation vote did not feature on either session's agenda and it has not set a new date to approve the remaining ministers.

Government formation has dragged on since Adel Abdel Mahdi, 76, was appointed prime minister in early October.

He had launched a website to allow Iraqis to apply for a ministerial position online and more than 15,000 sent in bids, but most of the names that were approved on October 25 were well-known political figures.



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## [Egypt convicts 65 on terror charges, allegiance to Daesh](#)

Author:

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CAIRO: An Egyptian court on Thursday sentenced 65 suspected Daesh extremists to between five years and life in prison for setting up a "terrorist cell", a court official said.

The alleged cell had members in various parts of impoverished upper Egypt and

was led by an “emir” Mostafa Ahmed Abdelaal.

The militants, charged in 2017, had “set up a terrorist cell in Upper Egypt which declared allegiance to (IS leader) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”, the court official said.

The court sentenced 18 of the defendants to life terms (25 years) and another 41 to 15-year prison terms.

It also handed six minors five years each in jail and acquitted two suspects. The sentences can be appealed.

Since Egypt’s military toppled president Mohamed Morsi in 2014, the government and security forces have cracked down hard on secular opposition and extremism.

The Egyptian branch of Daesh has led an insurgency in North Sinai and carried out attacks across the country.

Egypt’s army launched a major offensive in February dubbed “Sinai 2018” to dislodge the insurgents from the peninsula.

More than 450 suspected extremists and around 30 Egyptian soldiers have been killed since the offensive began, the army said in October.

Jihadist attacks in recent years have killed hundreds of police, soldiers and civilians.

Daesh claimed responsibility for an attack last week against Egyptian Christians in Minya province, which killed six Copts and one Anglican.

Egyptian courts have convicted many suspected extremists in mass trials which have been criticised by human rights groups.

An Egyptian military court on Wednesday sentenced eight Daesh members to death for a deadly attack against the army in 2016, officials said.



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