

Biden starts off tough on Turkey, with rocky path ahead

Author:

Shaun TANDON | AFP

ID:

1613147917819060500

Fri, 2021-02-12 16:33

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden has opened his presidency by taking a visibly harder line on Turkey, with analysts expecting a rocky path ahead between the uneasy allies as their interests increasingly diverge.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, like many of the leaders who wooed Biden's predecessor Donald Trump, is getting an early cold shoulder from Biden, who before being elected described the president an autocrat and promised to empower the opposition.

Biden has not called Erdogan and the new administration has immediately rebuked Turkey, urging the release of prominent civil society leader Osman Kavala and criticizing homophobic rhetoric in a crackdown on student demonstrators.

The statements are in line with Biden's vow to put a new priority on democracy promotion, but the United States and Turkey have plenty of other disputes likely to exacerbate tensions.

Erdogan defiantly bought Russia's advanced S-400 missile system, brushing aside warnings that it was jeopardizing its role in the NATO alliance, leading Trump to impose narrow sanctions on the Turkish defense industry in the face of outrage in the US Congress.

And a New York court in May will start a trial of Turkey's state-run Halkbank over allegedly evading sanctions on Iran, potentially inflicting a heavy economic blow on Turkey.

"Relations can improve for the better, but I think people will have to temper their expectations," said Steven Cook, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

"Turkey and the United States have different interests and do not share values. The two countries can work together on some issues, but there is nothing that binds them together any longer."

Gonul Tol, director of the Turkey program at the Washington-based Middle East Institute, said that the S-400s posed an especially knotty problem as Erdogan had cast the purchase in nationalist terms, saying Ankara was asserting independence.

But Erdogan, she said, is under pressure over a struggling economy and has an interest in avoiding more wide-ranging US sanctions if he moves further on the S-400s.

"I think he's realizing that he's very isolated in the region and that his whole anti-Western, anti-US rhetoric is not working for him," Tol said.

After Biden took office, Turkey proposed a compromise in which it does not fully operate the S-400s, but the State Department insisted that its ally not "retain" the multibillion-dollar system that NATO fears will help Russia hone its ability to shoot down Western jets.

Yet Tol said that Biden, despite his emphasis on democracy, was also pragmatic. She pointed to his early stance on Russia in which the administration has been forthright on concerns but also extended the New START nuclear reduction treaty.

"I think there are several camps in the Biden administration and some might say, let's see how Turkey behaves on issues critical to the US such as the S-400s, the Eastern Mediterranean and Nagorno-Karabakh," she said, referring to heightened tension between Turkey and fellow NATO ally Greece and Ankara's support for Azerbaijan's offensive to retake land held by Armenia.

"If there is a sign that they can actually cooperate with Turkey on matters that are important to national security, then I think we could see a softer approach overall," Tol said.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his confirmation hearing pointedly called Turkey "our so-called strategic partner," although State Department spokesman Ned Price has since described Turkey as a "longstanding and valued NATO ally."

"We seek cooperation on common priorities and, as with any ally, we engage in dialogue to address disagreements," Price told reporters.

He pointed to shared interest in ending Syria's civil war. But Syria has been a persistent source of friction since Biden's former boss Barack Obama aligned with Kurdish fighters – linked to separatists inside Turkey – to defeat Daesh.

The Eurasia Group in an analysis said that both Turkey and the United States had an interest in improving ties but put a 60 percent probability on talks breaking down in the second half of 2021, most likely over the S-400s or Syria.

In an essay, Galip Dalay, a non-resident fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, expected US-Turkish tensions to fester, saying the two nations had different views on what resetting the relationship meant.

For Biden, he wrote, a reset means restoring a US-led liberal international order in which Turkey reverses its growing ties with Russia and a rising China.

But for Erdogan, "a reset means that the US would come to terms with the new geopolitical reality in Turkey's neighborhood, including Turkey's role in it."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Turkey](#)

[US](#)

[Joe Biden](#)

[Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)

Opposition Turkish lawmaker regains seat after jail
Turkey's Syria strategy in doubt after US policy shift

[Iranian official arrested in Istanbul over dissident's killing](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1613153976949588200

Fri, 2021-02-12 18:13

ISTANBUL: Turkey has arrested an Iranian official suspected of instigating the killing of an Iranian dissident in Istanbul 15 months ago, sources familiar with the matter said on Friday.

Confirming a report in Turkey's Sabah newspaper, the sources said Mohammad Reza Naserzadeh was detained earlier this week on suspicion of planning the shooting of Masoud Molavi Vardanjani, a critic of Iran's political and

military leadership.

The case could strain ties between Iran and Turkey, regional powers which have grown closer under Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan despite sometimes deep differences, including in Syria where they back opposing sides in the 10-year conflict.

Iran's Foreign Ministry said the newspaper report was "baseless."

Vardanjani was shot dead on an Istanbul street in November 2019, a year after leaving Iran and criticizing what he said was corruption in the Islamic Republic in a series of social media posts.

Last year two senior Turkish officials told Reuters his killing was instigated by intelligence officials at Iran's consulate in Istanbul. A senior US administration official also said Washington believed Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security was directly involved.

At the time, one of the Turkish officials identified the two suspects by initials – one set of which matched Naserzadeh's.

Sabah said Naserzadeh was working at the civic registry department of the Iranian consulate in Istanbul but Reuters was not able to independently confirm that element of its report.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh denied that any consulate staff member was involved in Vardanjani's killing and said Iran was in talks with Turkish officials to shed light on the issue, according to the foreign ministry's website.

In December, Turkish officials accused Iranian authorities of targeting another opponent in Istanbul when they announced they had detained 11 people involved in the abduction and smuggling to Iran of an Iranian dissident wanted in connection with a deadly attack in southwestern Iran.

Habib Chaab, an Iranian ethnic Arab separatist leader, was drugged and kidnapped by a network working "on behalf of Iran's intelligence service" after being lured into flying to Turkey by an Iranian intelligence operative, a senior official said.

Last week an Iranian diplomat accused of planning to bomb a meeting of an exiled opposition group was sentenced to 20 years in prison by a court in Belgium, the first trial of an Iranian official for suspected terrorism in Europe since Iran's 1979 revolution.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iran](#)

[Turkey](#)

Iran's dissident surveillance operation exposed
Dissident politician and journalist severely beaten in Ankara

[Algerian president returns from Germany after post-Covid surgery](#)

Fri, 2021-02-12 20:45

ALGIERS: Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune returned home Friday after a one-month stay in Germany for surgery following post-Covid-19 complications in his foot, state television said.

"The President of the Republic, Supreme Chief of the Armed Forces and Minister of Defence, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, returned today," the state broadcaster said, but did not broadcast images of his arrival.

Tebboune, 75, had been hospitalised in Germany last year after contracting Covid-19, and stayed there for two months before returning to Algeria. He returned to Germany on January 10, and underwent a “successful” operation on his foot 10 days later, according to the presidency.

Algeria has recorded over 110,000 cases including over 2,900 deaths from Covid-19 since the pandemic began.

On the eve of his return, Tebboune had called German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to thank him for the medical care he had received.

Among the key issues that await him include the development of the new electoral law ahead of anticipated local and legislative elections slated to be held by the end of the year.

A government reshuffle is also expected.

Tebboune won office in December 2019, eight months after the popular Hirak protest movement swept out his ailing predecessor Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Tebboune’s initial convalescence in Germany had reminded many Algerians of octogenarian Bouteflika’s frequent hospitalisations abroad.

Tebboune’s return comes amid tension in the North African nation ahead of the second anniversary of the launch of the Hirak protests on February 22.

Hirak protesters continued after Bouteflika’s fall, demanding a full overhaul of the ruling system in place since the Algeria’s 1962 independence from France.

However, social distancing rules to stem the coronavirus pandemic meant that protesters had to halt their street rallies early last year.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Algeria](#)

[Abdelmajid Tebboune](#)

[Coronavirus](#)

Algeria orders investigation into student police abuse claimAlgeria trial

over French mountaineer's murder postponed

Morocco PM denounces Polisario 'media war'

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-12 02:49

RABAT: Morocco's Premier Saad-Eddine El-Othmani has rejected as propaganda a claim made this week by pro-independence rebels fighting over disputed Western Sahara that they had killed three of the kingdom's soldiers.

The Algeria-backed Polisario Front said on Tuesday it had killed three Moroccan soldiers in the southern Ouarkziz area in the Akka region the previous day in a raid on a garrison that saw it overrun then destroyed.

The Moroccan prime minister on Wednesday rejected the claim in a tweet.

"It's yet another example of the media war, backed by 'fake news,' that the Polisario separatists are waging to make people believe in imaginary victories," he wrote.

The Far-Maroc unofficial website dedicated to military news said the Polisario claim was "malicious rumor of enemies of the Moroccan nation."

"There is no way to attack Akka except from Algerian soil and under the eyes of the Algerian army, which would mean an explicit declaration of war by Algeria against the kingdom," it said on Facebook.

The claim is the first time the Polisario have said they inflicted losses on the Moroccan army on the kingdom's soil since mid-November, but it could not be verified independently.

Tensions rose sharply between the two sides on November 13 when Morocco sent troops into a buffer zone to reopen the only road leading from Morocco to Mauritania and the rest of West Africa, after the separatists had blocked it the previous month.

The Polisario responded by declaring a 1991 United Nations-backed cease-fire null and void, arguing the road had not existed when the truce was signed and was therefore illegal.

The two sides have since exchanged regular fire along the demarcation line.

The 1991 cease-fire deal was meant to lead to a referendum on self-determination for the Britain-sized territory, home to about one million people.

Morocco has offered autonomy but maintains the territory is a sovereign part of the kingdom.

The Polisario, which fought a war for independence from Morocco from 1975 to 1991, has said it is still willing to join UN talks on the territory's future – but would not lay down its arms.

The talks ground to a halt in March 2019.

Rabat has won the recognition of its claim to sovereignty over the entire disputed territory from numerous countries, which have opened consulates in Western Sahara.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Morocco](#)

Morocco receives 4 mln doses of AstraZeneca vaccine from India
Flood kills 24 people in illegal factory in Morocco

[Moscow calls on Iran for 'restraint' after uranium metal production](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-12 02:25

MOSCOW: Russia has urged Iran to show restraint after it started producing uranium metal in a new breach of limits laid out in Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

"We understand the logic of their actions and the reasons prompting Iran. Despite this it is necessary to show restraint and a responsible approach," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told state news agency RIA Novosti. The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said on Wednesday that it had verified the production of 3.6 grams of uranium metal at a plant in Iran.

The landmark deal – reached in 2015 by the US, China, Russia, Germany, France and Britain – contained a 15-year ban on "producing or acquiring plutonium or uranium metals or their alloys."

Iran said last month it was researching uranium metal production, a sensitive issue because uranium metal can be used as a component in nuclear weapons. Ryabkov said Iran's move demonstrated Tehran's "determination not to put up with the current situation," after it warned that time was running out for US President Joe Biden's administration to save the agreement. In 2018, US President Donald Trump dramatically withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed crippling economic sanctions on Tehran. Trump's successor Biden is seeking to revive the agreement, but the two sides appear to be in a standoff over who acts first. Ryabkov's remarks came as Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard on Thursday began a ground forces drill near the Iraqi border, state TV reported. The report said the annual exercise was ongoing in the southwest of the country and had aimed at readiness and assessment of forces. Drones and helicopters will be used in the drill, too. In recent months, Iran has increased its military drills as the country tries to pressure President Biden over the nuclear accord. In January, the Guard conducted a drill and launched anti-warship ballistic missiles at a simulated target in the Indian Ocean. A week before that, Iran's navy fired cruise missiles as part of a naval drill in the Gulf of Oman, state media reported, under surveillance of what appeared to be a US nuclear submarine. That came after speedboats parade in the Gulf and a massive drone exercise across the country.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iran uranium](#)

France warns Iran against further nuclear breaches, jeopardising diplomacy
Iran's Revolutionary Guard begins ground forces drill near Iraqi border