

Turkey keeps opposition activist in solitary confinement

Author:

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ISTANBUL: An Istanbul court ruled to keep renowned Turkish activist and businessman Osman Kavala behind bars in solitary confinement on Friday in the high-profile second trial of Kavala and Turkish-American academic Henri Barkey. The court also merged the current case with the landmark anti-government Gezi Park protests' trial.

Amid anti-American conspiracy theories about the involvement of the US in orchestrating the failed coup attempt in 2016, Barkey and Kavala are being tried on espionage charges and accusations of helping the coup attempt. If convicted, they face life sentences.

Speaking in his defense on Friday Kavala said that as the knowledge of the falseness of allegations against him is more and more publicized, each refusal of his bail becomes an increasingly egregious rights violation.

Kavala's co-defendant Barkey, an American citizen, is being tried in absentia.

Kavala, who was first detained in October 2017 and remanded in pre-trial detention on Nov. 1, 2017, has been behind bars ever since. Although he was acquitted of all charges in the anti-government Gezi Park protests in February 2020, he was then accused of overthrowing the constitutional order and of espionage. Kavala has been behind bars for 1193 days without conviction.

The Kavala case is seen as a way for Turkey's rulers to threaten other activists that push for Western values such as pluralism, democratization and human rights in the country.

Nine European rights ambassadors from Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden released a joint declaration on Thursday calling for the immediate release of Kavala and expressed "great concern" over the rule of law, human rights and judiciary record in Turkey.

The ambassadors also urged Ankara to implement binding judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

"The continued imprisonment of Osman Kavala in Turkey is politically motivated and goes against judgments of the European Court of Human Rights," Barbel Kofler, German human rights commissioner, tweeted.

In 2019, ECHR ruled that Kavala's extended detention had an "ulterior purpose, namely to reduce him to silence as an NGO activist and human rights defender, to dissuade other persons from engaging in such activities and to

paralyze civil society in the country” and therefore violated the European Convention on Human Rights that Turkey is bound to respect as a state party.

Turkey insists on defying the rulings of the court not only for Kavala case but also for Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas, who has also been kept behind bars for years.

Speaking at the Parliamentary Assembly on Jan. 25, the Council of Europe’s Secretary-General Marija Pejcinovic Buric warned Ankara that compliance with the ECHR ruling on the Kavala case is not “a kind request,” but rather “a binding legal requirement.”

Although the case of Kavala and Barkey has not been prioritized in the bilateral agenda of Ankara and the Biden administration, the criminal proceedings against an American citizen might draw US engagement about improving the rule of law with its strategic partners, experts note.

Merve Tahiroglu, Turkey program coordinator at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), said Biden took a welcome U-turn from Trump’s brazen embrace of global strongmen and has begun to follow a foreign policy that emphasizes democracy and human rights.

“Already in a few weeks in office, his administration has been more outspoken on Erdogan’s repression in Turkey than his predecessors. I think they are watching this case very closely as well,” she told Arab News.

According to Tahiroglu, Kavala’s unjust prosecution singularly reflects the complete erosion of the rule of law, the repression of Turkish civil society, and the weaponization of anti-Western conspiracy theories against government critics.

During a speech on Feb. 5, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan targeted Kavala’s wife, Ayse Bugra. Bugra is a well-known academic who teaches at Istanbul’s prestigious Bogazici University, which became a scene of protests from academics and students for more than a month after the appointment of a political figure – and a loyalist to Erdogan – as the new rector.

“The wife of Osman Kavala, the person who is the representative of Soros in this country, is a person who is among these provocateurs at Bogazici University,” Erdogan said, following similar statements he gave in the past by accusing Kavala of being the agent of US financier George Soros.

Kavala turned to the Constitutional Court last year, saying his illicit detention violated his right to liberty and security. The court ruled on Dec. 29 that his detention was not a violation.

“Last year, the judges who ordered the acquittal of the Gezi trial defendants, including Kavala, were quickly put under investigation. The latest comments by President Erdogan represent another proof that this is a politically motivated prosecution,” said Amnesty International’s Turkey campaigner, Milena Buyum.

Kavala’s next trial will be held on May 21. The Council of Europe’s Committee

of Ministers will resume its examination of Kavala's case in March 2021.

According to Buyum, the court ruling on Friday confirmed once again that the continuous calls of ECHR and its criticisms about political motivations behind the arrest were real.

"It is not a trial; it is a direct punishment. There is no single evidence that Kavala tried to overthrow the constitutional order," she said.

ECHR found that article 18 of the European Convention of Human Rights was violated through Kavala's arrest. Article 18 determines the limitation on the use of restrictions on rights.



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Two years on, Turkish dissident remains behind bars Turkish rights activist Kavala's prison term extended

[Former Trump diplomat warns of rising Russian influence in Middle East](#)

Sat, 2021-02-06 00:55

CHICAGO: Russia is aggressively competing to replace American interests in the Middle East in a way not seen since the 1973 Arab-Israeli "October War," the former US envoy to Syria under President Donald Trump warned on Friday.

James F. Jeffrey, now chairman of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, said during a media briefing that Moscow's interests in the region are not restricted to Syria or working with Iran, but extend to forging alliances with regional players such as Turkey and Iraq.

He added that Russia is leveraging the approach of the new US administration to Iran in its efforts to build stronger alliances.

"Russia is very active in the region," he said. "(In) the two areas where it is militarily present, Libya and Syria, it has been stymied largely by Turkish military responses, particularly in Syria, with some American diplomatic support.

"But Russia is trying its very best to present an alternative security architecture for the region. (The Russians) are our competition in the region as much as the Iranians are.

"That (growing Russian influence) is a new factor that was not present in any major way during the Obama administration. That is something I would urge the Biden administration to focus on; the problem with Russia in the region is very important."

Jeffrey added that the message the Kremlin is sending to regional powers is clear, and that it is threatening US interests by implying support for Iran.

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"Now you have a third factor – for the first time since the Yom Kippur War (another name for the October War) or perhaps Afghanistan in the 1980s – which is an active Russian presence in the region, which is a potential security alternative to the US," he said.

"I would urge the (Biden) administration to pay attention to that because it is something new."

Jeffrey said that while President Joe Biden is keen for a quick return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, he should be wary of Russia positioning itself to expand its alliances in the region by using Syria and Iran as bases.

Any reduction of US presence in the region could lead to even closer ties between Tehran and Moscow, which would increase the confidence of the Iranian regime, he added.

Jeffrey also described the ongoing conflict in Syria as "the biggest mistake of the Obama administration" because it is "a military stalemate" that Russia could manipulate in the hope of becoming a force equal to the US in the region.

Biden outlined his own concerns about Russia on Thursday, as he distanced himself from the position taken by the Trump administration.

“I made it clear to President (Vladimir) Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days of the US rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions – interfering with our elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens – are over,” he said.

“We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people. And we will be more effective in dealing with Russia when we work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners.”

Jeffrey also predicted on Friday that the Biden administration will retain the sanctions placed on Turkey by Trump in the weeks before he left office. They were imposed in response to Ankara’s purchase of the Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, which the West views as a threat to NATO and the US F35 Lightning II advanced stealth surveillance and combat jet.



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Biden strikes tough tone on Russia in diplomatic push
Russia-Iran cooperation in Syria sends message to US

Blinken discusses Iran with UK, French, German ministers

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Fri, 2021-02-05 20:24

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed Iran and other issues on Friday in a virtual meeting with his British, French and German counterparts as the group weighs how to revive the Iran nuclear deal.

“We just had a in-depth and important conversation on Iran ... to handle together nuclear and regional security challenges,” French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Twitter, adding other issues were also addressed. The high-level conversation is the latest step by President Joe Biden’s new administration to explore how to restore the 2015 nuclear deal that Iran signed with world powers but was abandoned in 2018 by Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price declined to comment on the substance of the meeting, but said Washington wanted “to make sure that we are working in lockstep with our European partners” on Iran.

Earlier, a US official said the meeting between Blinken, Le Drian, Britain’s Dominic Raab and Germany’s Heiko Maas would also cover the coronavirus pandemic, Russia, China, Myanmar and climate.

The nuclear deal limited Iran’s uranium enrichment activity to make it harder for Tehran to develop nuclear arms – an ambition Iran has long denied having – in return for the easing of US and other sanctions.

In abandoning the deal approved by former President Barack Obama, Trump restored the US sanctions it had removed and then piled on more.

Biden, who took office last month, has said that if Tehran returned to strict compliance with the 2015 nuclear pact, Washington would follow suit and use that as a springboard to a broader agreement that might restrict Iran’s missile development and regional activities.

Tehran has insisted that Washington ease sanctions before it resumed compliance, and ruled out negotiations on wider security issues. But Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hinted on Monday at a way to resolve the impasse over who goes first by saying the steps could be synchronized.



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[Algeria trial over French mountaineer's murder postponed](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-05 02:34

ALGIERS: A trial in Algeria over the murder of French mountaineer Herve Gourdel by terrorists in 2014 was postponed on Thursday due to the prime

suspect's ill health, judicial sources said.

Abdelmalek Hamzaoui, an alleged terrorist, had arrived at court for the opening hearing of the trial in a wheelchair, and according to a doctor who accompanied him, he is asthmatic and had undergone hip surgery.

"Given the state of health of the main defendant Hamzaoui, the court decided to postpone the case to Feb. 18," said the presiding judge of the court in Dar El Beida, a suburb of Algiers.

The slain hiker's partner, Francoise Grandclaude, was "disappointed" about the postponement, said her lawyer, Chawki Benarbia, gave the same reason for the postponement.

Gourdel, 55, was abducted on Sept. 21, 2014 while exploring Djurdjura National Park, a draw for hikers but which has long been a sanctuary for extremists.

Three days after he disappeared, gunmen from militant group Jund Al-Khilafa published a video of his execution-style beheading.

France had rejected their demand to halt airstrikes against Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

Three months later, after a massive manhunt, Gourdel's body was found in a booby-trapped grave.

Fourteen people face charges over the case. Only Hamzaoui is known to be in custody.

Seven others are being tried in absentia, but no details have been made public on the charges they face.

Gourdel's Algerian guides are also accused of failing to alert the authorities to his kidnapping, while another person is facing unspecified charges.

Gourdel's gruesome killing caused shock both in France and in Algeria, where it triggered memories of the decade-long civil war between Islamists and the army that left some 200,000 dead.

The murder came in the wake of Daesh terrorists dramatic takeover of northern Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014.

Jund Al-Khilafa – Arabic for Soldiers of the Caliphate – had sworn allegiance to Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi just weeks before his killing.

Hamzaoui, arrested in late 2014 on suspicion of belonging to Jund Al-Khilafa, is accused of "kidnapping, torture and premeditated murder" as well as joining an "armed terrorist group" – charges that can carry the death penalty.

Gourdel's five Algerian guides, who were initially captured alongside him but were released hours later, had also been due to appear in court.

They are accused of neglecting to tell the authorities they were hosting a foreign national and of failing to raise the alarm promptly after he was kidnapped.

The Algerian government has said this delay had given the kidnapers time to flee.

But ahead of the trial, a lawyer for one of the guides had questioned the logic of the charge, which could carry a sentence of up to five years' jail. "My client informed the authorities as soon as he could – after he was released by the kidnapers," said Faycal Ramdani.

Authorities have not made public any details on the other defendants.

Two decades since the end of Algeria's civil war, the authorities regularly report clashes between the army and militant groups.

In 2016, authorities said they had wiped out almost all the Jund Al-Khilafa group.



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[Head of Libyan parliament arrives in Cairo following invitation from Egyptian president](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-05 00:51

CAIRO: Speaker of the Libyan Parliament Aguila Saleh arrived in Cairo on a visit following an invitation from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

During the visit, discussions are expected to take place between Saleh, El-Sisi and Egyptian officials about the latest developments in Libya.

Fathi Al-Marimi, adviser to the speaker, denied reports regarding the resignation of Saleh, saying they were unfounded. He explained that Saleh did not submit his resignation from the presidency of the council to any party,

despite the fact that he is the closest candidate to winning the position of head of the Presidential Council in Libya.

Al-Marimi praised the political leadership in Egypt for embracing Libyan dialogue sessions and working toward returning stability to Libya, saying that El-Sisi played a pivotal and effective role in bringing together the Libyan factions that were fighting before Egypt joined the dialogue sessions.

Egypt is one of the first countries to support the stability of Libya and create new channels for reconciliation.

Saleh added that Libyan national security and stability are linked to those of Egypt, as the two countries are neighbors. He stressed the role of the Egyptian people and media in supporting Libya, its people and their demands for stability.

Al-Marimi indicated that Egypt and its political leadership helped Libya in fighting terrorism, foreign interference and the attacks of mercenaries inside the country.

This comes as the Libyan Dialogue Forum continues to vote on candidates for the interim executive authority, including Saleh, to lead the country toward elections by the end of the year.

On Tuesday, members of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum finished voting for the position of head of the Presidential Council.

Saleh received nine votes – the highest number – but the UN mission in Libya announced that the results of the elections inside the electoral complexes would not be decided in favor of any candidate.

Libya's Al-Ahrar channel quoted a source saying that the members of the forum had agreed to pledge to the candidates running for office to resign if one of them wins.

The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Geneva announced the transition to vote on candidates for the Presidential Council in the prospective interim executive authority with a list system after the candidates failed to achieve the required percentage for their individual election.

A source from the Libyan Political Dialogue Committee confirmed that the vote would take place on Friday.



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UN Security Council orders ceasefire monitors deployed to LibyaUN Libya forum starts voting for country's interim presidency council