

UN says breakthrough achieved in Libya transition talks

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CAIRO: The top UN official for Libya said Saturday that an advisory committee for representatives of Libya's different regions has proposed a way forward for choosing a transitional government that would lead the war-torn country to elections late this year.

The talks in Geneva, structured around the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, have been taking place amid a heavy international push to reach a peaceful settlement to Libya's civil war. Previous diplomatic initiatives have all collapsed.

UN acting envoy for Libya Stephanie Williams told a news conference in Geneva that the advisory committee's members "have met their responsibility with a constructive spirit, cooperative efforts, and a great deal of patriotism." The committee is part of a 75-member forum that represents all the three main regions of Libya. The 18-member committee has proposed that each region's electoral college name a representative to a three-member presidential council, Williams said. A prime minister would be chosen by the 75-member forum. A successful nominee should receive 70% of votes.

Williams said that the forum would resort to lists formed from Libya's three regions, with each list consisting of four names, nominated for the presidential council and a prime minister position.

She said a list should obtain 17 endorsements: eight from the western region, six from the eastern region and three from southern Libya. The winning list should receive 60% of the votes of the 75-member forum in the first round. A run-up is expected if no list received the required votes, she said.

Williams said the forum would vote on the proposed mechanism on Monday and the results are expected the following day.

The transitional government would be "a temporary unified executive staffed by Libyan patriots who want to share responsibility rather than to divide the cake," the UN acting envoy said.

The US welcomed the breakthrough and urged all parties of Libya "to work with urgency and in good faith" to establish an interim government, according to a statement by the US Embassy in Libya.

"It is time to move past the conflict and corruption facilitated by the status quo," it said.

The forum is part of the UN efforts to end the chaos that engulfed the oil-rich North African nation after the 2011 overthrow and killing of dictator Muammar Qaddafi. It has reached an agreement last year to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on Dec. 24, 2021.

The oil-rich country is now split east to west between two rival administrations, each backed by an array of militias and foreign powers.

The warring sides agreed to a UN-brokered cease-fire in October in Geneva, a

deal that included the departure of foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya within three months.

No progress was announced on the issue of foreign forces and mercenaries since they inked the cease-fire deal almost two months ago.



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UN chief Guterres tries again to appoint a Libya mediator
UN chief recommends Libya cease-fire monitors be based in Sirte

[Tunisian premier announces major cabinet reshuffle](#)

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Sat, 2021-01-16 19:09

TUNIS: Tunisia's Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi announced on Saturday a major cabinet reshuffle affecting 12 ministries, in the wake of high-profile sackings.

"The aim of this reshuffle is to achieve greater efficiency in the work of the government," Mechichi said at a press conference in the capital Tunis. The new line-up, which does not include any women, must be approved by parliament.

A few hours before the announcement, Mechichi had met with President Kais Saied, who insisted the "integrity" of proposed ministers should "raise no doubt," according to a statement from the presidency.

"There is no place (in the government) for people who are subject to legal proceedings" or to "doubts about their background or their behavior that could undermine the state and the credibility of its institutions and the legitimacy of its decisions," Saied said.

One of the officials to be replaced is former environment minister Mustapha Aroui, who was sacked and arrested in December in a scandal over hundreds of containers of household waste shipped from Italy.

Chiheb Ben Ahmed, CEO of the Tunisian Export Promotion Center (CEPEX), was proposed as his replacement.

Cabinet chief Walid Dhahbi has been put forward as interior minister to replace Taoufik Charfeddine.

The former lawyer and pillar of Saied's election campaign was sacked earlier this month over high-level staffing changes he sought to make to some security agencies, according to a previous statement from Mechichi.

The reshuffle also impacts the ministries of health, justice, industry, energy and agriculture.

Ten years after the uprising that led to the fall of long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia has successfully transformed into a democracy – albeit one still riven by corruption and economic pain.

The country has had nine governments in 10 years, but the transfers of power have been peaceful.

However, since a general election in 2019, the political class has been more fragmented than ever and paralyzed by infighting, fueling discontent over the continued economic malaise, which has been exacerbated by the novel coronavirus pandemic.



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Tunisia marks revolution's 10th anniversary in lockdown
Tunisia to lock down for four days from Thursday

[How Iran serves as 'a key geographic hub for Al-Qaeda'](#)

Sat, 2021-01-16 22:06

WASHINGTON, DC: Mike Pompeo, the outgoing US secretary of state, made a splash last week when he unveiled new intelligence pointing to an enduring operational relationship between the regime in Iran and Al-Qaeda's international terror network.

Although senior Al-Qaeda operatives are long known for using Iran as a transit point and shelter, what many policymakers and the general public have

failed to grasp is just how vital the safe haven offered by the Islamic Republic has become to Al-Qaeda's survival.

Iran is now officially the last government in the world that knowingly harbors and facilitates Al-Qaeda activity. Revelations concerning the full extent of this nexus come as Iran accelerates its drive towards nuclear-weapons capability with threats and warnings that are a belated wake-up call for world leaders.



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed that arch-enemy Iran has become a new "home base" for Al-Qaeda worse than Afghanistan. (AFP/File Photo)

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s extraterritorial Quds Force has worked behind the scenes as a driver of both Tehran's illicit nuclear program and its facilitation of the terrorist activities of senior Al-Qaeda leaders who have sought refuge in Iran.

Concurrently, the Quds Force has used the threat of Al-Qaeda as a justification for the expansion of its Shiite militia proxies in Syria and Iraq. In reality of course, key figures in Al-Qaeda's central command have been traveling to Syria and establishing a foothold there with the connivance of their Quds Force patrons.

Anyone in search of proof need look no further than the sanctuary provided by Iran to Al-Qaeda's chief military strategist Saif Al-Adel, who masterminded the 2003 bombings of residential compounds in Riyadh, killing 39 and injuring 160.

Al-Adel, whose real name is believed to be Mohammed Salah Al-Din Zaidan, has

emerged as a key emissary for Al-Qaeda's operations in Syria and has even traveled there from Iran. Other senior Al-Qaeda operatives who were based in Iran before traveling to Syria include Muhsin Al-Fadhli, a former leader the group's Iran-based facilitation network, and Sanafi Al-Nasr, a senior operative who was given free rein to continue terrorist activities under the watchful eye of the Iranian government.

Against this backdrop, the Trump administration's focus in its waning days on Iran's emergence as a major Al-Qaeda hub is significant on several counts.

Above all, it intimates that the US and its allies can no longer turn a blind eye to the Iranian regime's complicity in Al-Qaeda activity, which was politically inconvenient for them during efforts to establish a nuclear deal at any cost.

The offer of a \$7 million reward by Pompeo for information leading to the capture or killing of Abd Al-Rahman Al-Maghrebi, the son-in-law and senior advisor to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and commander of Al-Qaeda's operations from Tehran, is a strong indicator of this shift.

Given that the incoming Biden administration will be composed of Obama-era officials who were involved in negotiating the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran (also known as JCPOA), a push to link sanctions on Iran to its continued support for Al-Qaeda (in addition to its stepped-up nuclear program) could offer US policymakers greater leverage.

"The relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda has long been understated if not ignored in Washington," Richard Goldberg, former Director for Countering Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Trump White House, told Arab News.

"Putting a bounty on the head of a top Al-Qaeda operative living in Iran forces the incoming Biden administration to confront Iran's sponsorship of terrorism across the spectrum. There's no more hiding this dangerous relationship."

THE NUMBER

\$7 million

*** US reward for information on 'Iran-based Al-Qaeda leader Muhammad Abbatay, also known as Abd Al-Rahman Al-Maghrebi.'**

Iran lives in hope that its strategy of denial and deceit will succeed. During negotiations with the Obama administration, Iranian officials such as Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif had attempted to spin the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions as necessary Western concessions for Iran to be able to focus on the real threat of fighting extremist groups, namely Daesh

and Al-Qaeda.

For similar reasons, Iran desperately tried to cover up the suspected Israeli killing of one of Al-Qaeda's most prolific terror masterminds, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, in August last year, when he was gunned down in the middle of Tehran.

Abdullah's elimination came as many Al-Qaeda operatives in Iran were being given a freer hand to operate and open nodes of communication and travel for the wider terrorist network.

For Iran, the ends justify the means, despite what to the casual observer may seem like a clash of worldviews between the Shiite theocracy and the Sunni radical Al-Qaeda.

"Many people think that because Al-Qaeda's ideology reviles Shiites that it could never cooperate with the Islamic Republic, and vice versa. But the hard men running Al-Qaeda and Iran do not simply behave according to their ideologies," Michael Doran, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, told Arab News.

"In terms of ideology, yes, Al-Qaeda and Iran are enemies. In terms of power and political interests, however, they are natural allies."



Members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) march during the annual military parade marking the anniversary of the outbreak of the 1980-1988 war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. (AFP/File Photo)

The need for heightened awareness in Western capitals of Iran's enabling of Al-Qaeda is underscored by Iran's parallel efforts to advance its nuclear

program in plain sight of the world. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) told the UN Security Council last week that Tehran has continued to “reduce its commitments” to restrictions imposed by the JCPOA.

The confidential IAEA report, obtained by CBS News, says Iran has started to manufacture equipment used to produce uranium metal at a facility in Isfahan. Uranium metal can be used to make the core of a nuclear warhead, although it is unclear yet when or if Iran might start producing the material.

Pointing out that the JCPOA “prohibits Iran from producing uranium metals for 15 years, and has additional curbs on Tehran conducting research and development on uranium metal in certain facilities,” the CBS News report quoted the IAEA report as saying that “Iran is making its departure from those commitments clear.”

According to Western intelligence agencies, recent Israeli airstrikes that targeted the IRGC’s Quds Force infrastructure in eastern Syria were intended to disrupt an overland delivery route that Iran has been using to transport smuggled components for its nuclear program.

This is an area on the Syrian-Iraqi border where Iran has developed a massive base of operations alongside thousands of trained Shiite foreign fighters under the guise of fighting extremism.

Unsurprisingly, the need for cooperation in the fight against terrorism was a core talking point pushed by Zarif before 2015 in public speeches and media appearances while attempting to convince American and European policymakers to finalize the JCPOA and subsequently lift sanctions on Iran, particularly those targeting the IRGC.



A missile launcher parked on a warship named after slain Naval commander Abdollah Roudaki, sailing through the waters in the Gulf during its

inauguration. (AFP/Iran's Revolutionary Guard via Sepah News/File Photo)

Now it seems clearer than ever that Iran was emboldened to boost Al-Qaeda's terrorist capabilities as it benefited financially from the windfall that resulted from the sealing of the nuclear deal.

"Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Republic have a long history of working together. The Al-Qaeda leadership even lives openly in Tehran," Alireza Nader, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, told Arab News.

"Of course, Zarif and his allies are very sensitive about these ties as they might complicate their plan to ease US pressure on the regime."

So now the question will be whether a new administration in Washington will take these lessons to heart and accept there is little strategic logic in pressuring Iran to end its nuclear aspirations without an equally aggressive push to unequivocally eliminate the Al-Qaeda leadership's presence in the country.

As things currently stand, experts say, Iran will almost certainly use any sanctions relief under a nuclear deal redux to expand the footprint of its militias in the Middle East and to perpetuate the symbiotic relationship it has nurtured with Al-Qaeda.

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US imposes fresh sanctions on Iran in final days of Trump presidency

[Security Council members approve choice of new UN envoy to Libya](#)

Sat, 2021-01-16 04:12

NEW YORK: Security Council members on Friday approved the appointment of veteran Slovak diplomat Jan Kubis as the UN's special envoy to Libya.

It came as UN officials said significant progress has been made in Geneva this week during the inaugural meeting of the advisory committee for the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF).

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres nominated Kubis to be his envoy, a

position that has been vacant since early March last year, when Ghassan Salameh resigned due to stress after less than three years in the job.

A number of replacements were suggested but members of the Security Council failed to agree on one. In December they overcame their differences and approved the choice of Bulgarian diplomat Nikolai Mladenov – only for him to surprise everyone by turning down the offer for “personal and family reasons.”

Kubis is currently the UN’s Special Coordinator for Lebanon. He previously held similar positions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile Guterres’s spokesman Stephane Dujarric hailed what the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) described as significant progress during the first meeting of the LPDF’s advisory committee, which began in Geneva on Jan. 13 and concludes on Jan. 16.

“The mission hopes shortly they will be able to narrow down the major differences and reach near consensus on many of the contentious issues concerning the selection-mechanism proposals,” Dujarric said.

The formation of the advisory committee was announced on Jan. 3. Its 18 members, including women, young people and cultural figures, were chosen to reflect the country’s wide geographical and political diversity.

The secretary-general’s acting special representative for Libya, Stephanie Williams, had indicated that the main task for the committee would be to deliberate on the contentious issues that have plagued the selection of a unified executive authority. The aim is to develop solid recommendations the LPDF can consider in line with the political roadmap agreed by its 75 members during their first round of talks in Tunis last year.

This roadmap represents a rights-based process designed to culminate in democratic and inclusive national elections Dec. 24 this year. The date is also that of Libya’s 70th Independence Day. The elections will mark the end of the transitional phase for the country and chart a new way forward.

“This unwavering achievement, this date to return the sovereign decision to its rightful owners, is our top priority,” said Williams in her opening remarks at the advisory committee meeting in Geneva this week.

She also rejected claims that UNSMIL will have any say in the selection of the new executive authority. “This is a Libyan-Libyan decision,” Williams said, adding that the interim authority is intended to “shoulder the responsibility in a participatory manner and not on the basis of power-sharing, as some believed.”

She added: “We want a participatory formula where there is no victor, no vanquished; a formula for coexistence for Libyans of various origins for a specific period of time until we pass on the torch.

UNSMIL spokesman Jean Alam said the Geneva talks have already overcome some major hurdles. This builds on the political accomplishments since the Tunis

meeting at which a consensus was reached on the political roadmap, the eligibility criteria for positions in the unified executive authority, and the authority's most important prerogative: setting a date for the elections.

He also reported "very encouraging progress" in military matters since the signing of a ceasefire agreement in October by the 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC), the members of which include five senior officers selected by the Government of National Accord and five selected by the Libyan National Army.

"This includes the recent exchanges of detainees conducted under the JMC's supervision, as part of wider confidence-building measures; the resumption of flights to all parts of Libya; the full resumption of oil production and export; as well as the proposed unification and restructuring of the Petroleum Facilities Guards, in addition to the ongoing serious talks on the opening of the coastal road between Misrata and Sirte, which we hope will take place very soon," said Alam.

He also hailed "promising developments" relating to the economy, including the recent unification of the exchange rate by the Central Bank of Libya, a step that requires the formation of a new authority for it to be implemented.

"The recent meeting between the ministries of finance was an important effort to unify the budget and allocate sufficient funding to improve services and rebuild Libya's deteriorating infrastructure, particularly the electrical grid," Alam said.

"All of these reforms are steps that will bring national institutions together to work in establishing a more durable and equitable economic arrangement."

Williams added that without a unified executive authority, it would be difficult to implement these steps.



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[Libyan Political Dialogue Forum \(LPDF\)](#)

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[Jan Kubis](#)

[UN Support Mission in Libya \(UNSMIL\)](#)

[Sudan schoolbook picture sparks angry reform debate](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-16 02:07

KHARTOUM: As Sudan's transitional government shifts the nation from the Islamist rule of ousted strongman Omar Bashir, a new schoolbook has sparked controversy for reproducing Michelangelo's iconic "Creation of Adam." Khartoum's government has embarked on deeply controversial reforms in a bid to boost its international standing and rescue its ailing economy – but bringing it into a confrontation with those who see changes as anti-Islamic. The offending picture, in a history textbook for teenagers, has become a flashpoint in the argument. "It is an ugly offense," said Sudan's Academy of

Islamic Fiqh, the body ruling on Islamic law, which issued an edict banning teaching from the book.

Michelangelo's fresco, depicting the Biblical story of God reaching out with his hand to give life to Adam, is a flagship piece of 16th century Renaissance art that forms part of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling in Rome. "The book glorifies Western culture in a way that makes it the culture of science and civilization – in contrast to its presentation of Islamic civilization," the Fiqh academy added.

BACKGROUND

In a viral video, a preacher broke down as he waved the book during Friday prayers, accusing it of promoting 'apostasy' and 'heresy.'

Furious Muslim clerics have railed against the book and other changes to the school curriculum.

In one video widely shared on social media, a preacher broke down as he waved the book during Friday prayers, accusing it of promoting "apostasy" and "heresy."

Another urged followers to "burn the book."

But others defended the changes, saying they were part of necessary education reforms.

"The picture is not in a religious book," teacher Qamarya Omar said.

"It is in a history book for the sixth-grade under a section called European Renaissance, which makes it placed in context."



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Sudan says it signed 'Abraham Accords' with USEthiopian envoy says Sudan border issue must be resolved 'amicably, urgently'