

US sanctions controversial deputy of Iraqi paramilitaries

Author:

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BAGHDAD: The United States on Wednesday imposed sanctions on an influential Iraqi militia leader and deputy of a powerful Iran-backed umbrella of mostly Shiite paramilitary groups, designating him a global terrorist figure. The move by the US Treasury against Abdulaziz Al-Mohammadawi, known as Abu Fadak, was expected by many Iraqi officials. It was also the second time in a week that a senior Iraqi militia official has been sanctioned.

The chairman of the paramilitary umbrella, the Popular Mobilization Forces, Falih Al-Fayyadh was sanctioned last Friday under the Magnitsky Act and accused of rights abuses against antigovernment protesters. The law allows the US to target any foreigner accused of human rights violations and corruption.

Abu Fadak, a senior figure of the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia, is also acting deputy chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces, a role he took on after a US airstrike last January in Baghdad killed the militia's deputy head Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, a powerful founding member of Kataib Hezbollah and the lead architect of the umbrella group of paramilitaries. Top Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander, Gen. Qassim Soleimani, was also killed in that airstrike.

Apart from being a member Kataib Hezbollah, which the US has described as an "Iran-backed terrorist organization," the US claims Abu Fadak is working with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's expeditionary Quds Force to "reshape official Iraqi state security institutions ... to instead support Iran's malign activities," according to the US State Department.

The statement said Iran-backed elements, including Kataib Hezbollah, are involved in sectarian violence and are responsible for attacks against Iraqi government facilities and diplomatic missions.

The PMF was formed in 2014 to counter the Daesh group, following a fatwa from Iraq's top Shiite cleric Ali Al-Sistani, and was later brought under the government's fold. Its growing influence in Iraqi affairs has alarmed the US officials who accuse it of orchestrating attacks on the American Embassy in Baghdad.

Abu Fadak was a largely unknown figure until he replaced Al-Muhandis even though some militia groups opposed his selection.

In contrast to Abu Fadak's designation, Iraq's Foreign Ministry promptly denounced last week's measures against Al-Fayyadh, who is a more established political figure and a former Iraqi national security adviser. The ministry said it would follow up with the incoming Biden administration in Washington on the matter.



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BEIRUT: Starting Thursday morning, the Lebanese people will be put to the test again, as a new 11-day lockdown is imposed. All projections predict a spike in the country's coronavirus disease (COVID-19) cases in the upcoming days, while the hundreds of intensive care hospital beds dedicated to COVID-19 patients are full. Doctors have started to check on patients inside ambulances, and ask those who need oxygen to provide it at their own expense, and stay home. According to the Lebanese Health Ministry's statistics, there were 618 critical cases and 80,386 active cases as of Wednesday morning, while the number of daily cases recorded has not dropped below 4,300 for days. These infections came a week after social interactions during New Year

celebrations.

A state of health emergency, a total lockdown and a curfew have been imposed in the country between Jan. 14-25, a period that can be extended, to face the most dangerous COVID-19 wave Lebanon has witnessed since recording its first case last February.

The Lebanese Armed Forces, along with the state's security apparatus, will ensure the implementation of the curfew across Lebanon, noting that this is the first time the army has been asked to take part in the measures to limit the spread of the virus.

Under the state of emergency, "the security forces and judicial authorities have the right to strictly enforce the laws that punish the hospitals that refuse to treat urgent cases, including coronavirus cases, punish those who do not abide by the prevention measures, and issue tickets for those who violate these measures and contribute to the spread of the virus."

The Supreme Defense Council has prohibited people from going onto the streets, with some exceptions for medical personnel, nursing staff, diplomats, travelers and the employees of a number of institutions that require minimum administration. However, food and grocery stores will only be operating through delivery service.

Lebanon's land and sea borders will be closed from Thursday, while the country's airport will be operating at its lowest operational capacity. Only transit passengers with tickets showing their crossing date will be allowed to cross into Lebanon through the land borders.

Minister of Health Hamad Hassan announced on Wednesday that he is now quarantined pending the necessary tests after three of his office staff tested positive for COVID-19, joining 18,715 others who have been forced to quarantine over the past 2 days.

This comes at a time when all eyes are on the government to the implement the measures after being criticized for a general state of confusion in previous weeks.

The country has also failed to form a government capable of leading the efforts to save Lebanon from its various crises beyond the coronavirus. The Health Ministry's statistics show that 45,445 positive COVID-19 cases were recorded in the first 12 days of January, while 53,559 cases were recorded during the whole month of December.

Firas Al-Abyad, director of the Hariri Governmental University Hospital, said that "a large number of people in Lebanon have caught the coronavirus. This requires ... people to be admitted into hospitals, which are at their maximum capacity. What scares us is that we have reached the point that we did not want to reach."

He expected that "the number of people in need (of) intensive care will double next week, which means that we are heading toward a major disaster."

Dr. Abdul Rahman Al-Bizri, head of the Health Ministry's Scientific Committee on Combatting the Coronavirus Pandemic, told Arab News: "I hope that the strict total lockdown will limit the spread of the virus. However, I am afraid of going back to how things were and completely opening up the country without any measures after the lockdown is over."

Al-Bizri is the person charged with communicating with Pfizer, on behalf of the Health Ministry, to procure its coronavirus vaccine.





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[Lebanese health minister hospitalized after testing positive for COVID-19](#)

Wed, 2021-01-13 22:34

BEIRUT: Lebanon's caretaker health minister Hamad Hasan was admitted to hospital the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on Wednesday evening.

The Hezbollah-appointed minister was transferred to the St. George hospital in Beirut's suburb of Al-Hadat for treatment, according to a hospital statement.

Hasan's condition was good, the statement added.

Lebanon has experienced a spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths over the past week, with a record-high of 5,540 new cases recorded on Friday.

The surge has been put down to widespread non-adherence to precautionary measures during holiday celebrations, during which the government eased restrictions.



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Lebanon declares state of emergency as military enforces lockdown
Lebanon begins new lockdown amid surge in coronavirus cases

[Turkey, Greece set for historic East Med talks](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-13 22:10

ANKARA: A first round of new exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece will

take place this month following Ankara's offer to discuss conflicting territorial claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The talks are set to take place in Istanbul on Jan. 25.

It will be the 61st round of exploratory talks to be held in the past 14 years, but previous meetings mainly focused on issues related to the Aegean Sea.

Athens is expected to focus discussions on maritime zones in the Aegean and East Med in line with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), while Ankara has not set any pre-conditions for the talks.

Turkey is not a signatory of UNCLOS and does not recognize the government of Cyprus, an EU member.

Rauf Mammadov, resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, told Arab News that any direct dialogue was a positive step toward reconciliation between the conflicting parties.

"The dialogue is also the sole non-conflict method toward resolving the disagreement in this particular case.

"The gist of the dispute between the two NATO members rests on a competing interpretation of international law. The alternative to talks is regular diplomatic feuds, sometimes accompanied by threats of military escalation," he said.

However, Oxford University Middle East analyst Samuel Ramani said that a short-term diplomatic breakthrough in the Med standoff between Greece and Turkey was "unlikely" to happen.

"Levels of trust on both sides are extremely low and both sides see any diplomatic overture as an image-branding exercise to the international community, rather than a sincere attempt to de-escalate the crisis," he added.

Ramani said it was "unsurprising" that Turkey offered to stage talks with Greece, as Ankara had hinted toward it previously.

"The only path to convergence in the Eastern Mediterranean is for some of the tensions around the Greece-Turkey dispute to ease. Turkey's recent overtures toward France are a positive step, as are the UAE's recent statements on de-escalating with Turkey," he added.

Turkey rejects the maritime boundary claims of Greece and Cyprus, claiming they violate the sovereign rights of both Turkey and Northern Cyprus.

Experts have also underlined the importance of the announcement's timing.

"Ankara and Athens are taking steps toward a potential compromise as the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) becomes operational. The project is a rare example of continuing economic cooperation between two neighboring nations,"

Mammadov said.

He added that a possible resolution to the East Med energy dispute would be successful if driven by mutually beneficial economic interests, similar to the SGC.

Charles Ellinas, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, told Arab News that the incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden must be of concern to Turkey, especially given that within a short length of time it had become the subject of sanctions both from the EU and America.

“It is very important that aggressive language and threats should be avoided. The recent warning from (Turkish President Recep Yayıp) Erdogan to the EU that in case it supports Greece, Turkey will return back to offshore surveys and further escalate the dispute, is not constructive,” he said.

Ellinas added that without a change in direction, Turkey was likely to face a difficult time with Biden, while a constructive start to discussions with Greece would be seen quite positively by the EU and the US.

On the other hand, both countries are hoping for stronger support from Washington in consolidating their regional gains and pushing for their “red lines” ahead of the upcoming inauguration of Biden on Jan. 20.

However, Ramani said that while a reduction of the aggression on both sides was possible, the core issues would be harder to resolve.

“Turkey will keep its gas extraction agreement with Libya, which is unacceptable to Greece. The Cyprus dispute is still a point of friction,” he added.

Decades-long efforts to establish peace in the divided island are on the verge of collapsing, especially after Ankara began advocating the division of Cyprus into two states in October last year.

The controversies unfolding around maritime rights and hydrocarbon explorations off the island are also adding fuel to the growing tensions in Eastern Mediterranean waters.

Ramani said that the key issue that Turkey-Greece dialogue would resolve, in theory, was the end of Turkish brinkmanship, such as harassment of fishing boats and provocative military drills. “It likely won’t solve the core problems,” he added.

In December, Turkey withdrew its Oruc Reis seismic research vessel that was operating in disputed waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, triggering a row with Athens over energy drilling prospects.

The ship will remain within the Turkish continental shelf until June 15 – a move that was seen by some as a goodwill gesture.

The 60th round of talks, the most recent between the two countries, began in Athens in March 2016. The talks continued for years through political

consultations, despite having no formal framework.

“Athens’ only pre-condition is that the exploratory discussions should address only the delimitation of maritime zones, based on international law, starting from where they stopped in March 2016. Turkey appears to prefer open-ended discussions. Hopefully, they will converge to an agreed agenda,” Ellinas said.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and Erdogan met EU member-state ambassadors in Ankara on Tuesday, in a move seen by many experts as another attempt to reconcile with the EU and mend ties with Greece. Cavusoglu is also set to travel to Brussels on Jan. 21.



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[Israel PM 'driving a wedge between](#)

Arab Israelis'

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-13 21:39

AMMAN: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been accused of cynically courting the Arab vote to ensure his own political survival.

Claims that the Israeli leader was exploiting the "good nature" of Arabs were made after he made a surprise visit to Nazareth, the largest Arab town in Israel, on Wednesday.

During the visit Netanyahu greeted Nazareth's mayor, Ali Salam, promising him a safe spot in the Likud's list for the Knesset elections due in late March.

The Israeli leader also promised to increase budget spending and strengthen laws to stem criminal violence causing growing concern among Israel's Palestinian citizens.

Police arrested 10 people after Netanyahu's visit sparked protests in the town.

Wadie Abu Nassar, director of the Haifa-based International Center for Consultations, told Arab News that the Israel leader is a "magician and his latest prize is the Arab community."

He added: "This is the first time in years that Netanyahu needs every vote, including Arabs, because of the challenges he is facing from his opponents. But he is a magician in politics and can never be counted out of any race."

Head of the Joint List Arab alliance, Ayman Odeh, said that the Israeli prime minister imagines that the Arab community has a "short memory."

"The only way to ensure the interests of the Arab community are met is through the unified voice of Arab citizens and their Jewish partners who are fighting with honor and dignity for peace, equality, democracy and social justice."

In a tweet, Odeh also accusing Netanyahu of attempting to drive a wedge between Arab Israelis.

Referring to clashes between police and protesters, he said: "If this is what your reconciliation attempts look like, better to stay home."

During the visit Netanyahu referred to his 2015 quote when he allegedly opposed Arabs voting in Israel with the comment that they are "coming in droves to vote."

"People misunderstood what I meant," he said. "I didn't oppose the Arab vote, I only said that they are voting in droves for the Joint List."

Netanyahu also said that Jews and Arabs are "dancing in the streets of Dubai,

so why shouldn't they be working together in Israel?"

The Israeli prime minister slammed the Joint List for opposing normalization treaties between Israel and four Arab countries.

Botrus Mansour, a Nazareth-based lawyer, told Arab News that the Israeli prime minister is exploiting the good nature of Arabs.

"He is using the agreements he made with Arab countries, and trying to use the fact that Arabs were disappointed with Benny Gantz and the Zionist left, to offer himself as an effective alternative. The Joint List has been splintered and Netanyahu is using that to make inroads."

In the last elections, the Joint List gained 15 seats, but is expected to gain 10 more seats in the coming poll.



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