

At least eight climbers killed in Iran, ship crew missing after snowfall and storms

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DUBAI: At least eight climbers have died and several more are missing in mountains north of Iran's capital Tehran after heavy snowfall and a blizzard, state television reported on Saturday, and the seven crew of a ship are also missing after storms in the Gulf.

Heavy snow and winds in several parts of Iran in the last days have closed many roads and disrupted transport.

Several climbers remain unaccounted for since Friday when two deaths were reported, while the number reported as missing has increased as concerned families contact the authorities, the broadcaster said.

Local news agency reports said the number of people unaccounted for on three popular trails could be as high as 12.

Tehran lies at the foot of the Alborz mountain range which has several ski resorts.

Separately, Iranian maritime authorities were searching for the seven crew members of an Iranian transport vessel that capsized in rough Gulf waters on Friday, the semi-official ISNA news agency reported.

"We are trying to find the missing by mobilising all our facilities and forces, and informing passing vessels and the naval search and rescue centres of Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan," Esmail Makkizadeh, deputy head of Iran's regional maritime body, was quoted as saying by ISNA.



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[Turkish-Israeli rapprochement: Dream or reality?](#)

Sat, 2020-12-26 21:04

ANKARA: After years of minimal and sour relations between Turkey and Israel, Ankara is set to extend an olive branch to Tel Aviv and improve bilateral diplomatic ties.

“Our relations with Israel in the intelligence field have not ceased anyway; they are still continuing,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Dec. 25, following reports that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has offered his mediation.

Recently, Erdogan's Adviser Mesut Hakki Casin said that Turkey could again buy weapons from Israel to strengthen cooperation between Turkish and Israeli defense industries.

Intelligence talks resumed between the two sides, and while commercial ties still continue, both countries expelled their ambassadors in May 2018 over the killing of dozens of Palestinians by Israeli forces along the Gaza border and the US decision to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem.

Erdogan said Turkey had some issues with "people at the top level" in Israel, adding that Palestine still constitutes Turkey's red line and that it was impossible for Ankara to accept Israel's "merciless" policies for the Palestinian territories.

The Mavi Marmara incident, which involved the raid of a Gaza-bound flotilla carrying humanitarian aid for Palestinians in 2010, resulted in a serious crisis for Turkish-Israeli relations that took almost a decade to recover despite US mediation.

As a serious stumbling block to the normalization of relations, Israel accuses Turkey of granting passports to members of Hamas in Istanbul. For its part, Ankara keeps criticizing the recent rapprochement between Israel and Gulf countries.

Experts do not anticipate a real improvement of bilateral ties before the outcome of Israeli elections in March 2021.

Dr. Selin Nasi, a researcher on Turkey-Israel relations from Bogazici University in Istanbul, thinks the two countries might exchange ambassadors in the future, perhaps after the Israeli elections in March.

"However, one has to distinguish between the prospective restoration of diplomatic relations and a genuine lasting normalization of bilateral ties. For the latter, rebuilding mutual trust becomes essential. This requires time as much as a recalibration of policies," she told Arab News.

According to Aydin Sezer, an Ankara-based Middle East expert, Turkey intends to reduce the number of its "foes" on the international scene.

"The election of Joe Biden to the US presidency has been an opportunity to repair ties. With this Israeli move, Turkey wants to reach out to the Jewish lobby in the US to get their unconditional support," he told Arab News.

"A normalization in Turkish-Israeli relations would also send a message to Tehran to watch its step in the region," Sezer added.

Ufuk Ulutas, the potential ambassador, is not a career diplomat. He has worked as the director of the pro-government think-tank SETA as an expert on Iran, studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and is known as a pro-Palestinian figure.

Speculations in Israel and Turkey are running high with regard to the serious problems that Ulutas might face in receiving diplomatic approval from the

Israeli government because of his anti-Israel views, which he has voiced in the past in different TV interviews and written reports.

Turkey's choice in Ulutas has been interpreted by the Israeli press as a "continuation of Ankara's provocation policy."

Appointing a professional diplomat to this post has been always the tradition in bilateral relations until the Mavi Marmara crisis and was seen as a gesture to show the importance that is accorded to the relations.

Soner Cagaptay of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy thinks Erdogan's remarks on Friday signal that Turkey wants to end its complete isolation in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, as it has almost no friends or allies in the region.

"There is also an Eastern Mediterranean angle in this willingness for rapprochement," he told Arab News.

The energy and defense cooperation between Egypt, Greece and Israel might create a challenging atmosphere for Turkish moves in the region.

"Turkey feels the need to break Israel from this alliance that excludes Turkey," Cagaptay said.

"There is a perception in Ankara that Erdogan's charm offensive toward Biden is to provide a sweetener to the US as Israel is America's closest ally in the Middle East. This driver seems also to be behind Erdogan's desire to normalization," he added.

Nasi thinks that the emergence of the EastMed Gas Forum in the Mediterranean as well as Israel's normalization of relations with Gulf countries proves the limits of Ankara's identity-based foreign policy.

"By normalizing relations with Israel, Ankara is primarily hoping to divide the power bloc in the Mediterranean, at best weaken what she perceives to be a hostile axis to constrain her. Rapprochement with Israel might also help Turkey to win Washington's ear again, neutralizing the opposition," she said.

However, Cagaptay is not sure that Israel will completely and immediately reciprocate.

"Nowadays, Israel is normalized in regional relations, in contrast to ten years ago. It has many friends. It will not immediately embrace Erdogan. They will remain lukewarm, and they will not be jumping to the conclusion that they will have full-fledged ties with Turkey anytime soon," he said.

"Turkey's ties with Hamas will also be an obstacle before the normalization."

Nasi agrees, also skeptical about whether Turkey is willing at this stage to compromise on the issue of providing support to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which constitutes one of the main obstacles hindering reconciliation from Israel's view.

"A long-lasting normalization between Turkey and Israel requires the

redefinition of bilateral ties on the basis of common geopolitical interests, downplaying ideological preferences,” she said.

For Nasi, there is still no clear indicator that Ankara is changing course.

“Turkish rulers seem to be after an easy victory, set for maximum gains at minimum costs. It is hard to reconcile normalization efforts with reports that suggest Turkey is allegedly granting passports to Hamas members or releasing of videos with a message of liberating Jerusalem,” she said.

“At the end of the day, messages addressed to a domestic audience are always being monitored by international public opinion.”



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Israeli strikes on Syria kill 6 Iran-backed fighters, says watchdog

[Turkish defence minister in Libya to discuss cooperation](#)

Sat, 2020-12-26 20:12

TRIPOLI: Turkey's Defence Minister Hulusi Akar made a surprise trip to Libya on Saturday, two days after strongman Khalifa Haftar urged his fighters to drive out Turkish forces from the oil-rich country.

The Turkish defence ministry said Akar would inspect Turkish forces in Libya during the visit, while Libyan officials said talks would focus on military cooperation between Tripoli and Ankara.

Turkey has backed the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) with military advisers, material and mercenaries against an offensive last year by the eastern-based Haftar.

Ankara also has a large military base in Al-Watiya region on Libya's border with Tunisia.

Akar's visit to Tripoli also came after the Turkish parliament this week adopted a motion extending the deployment of forces in Libya by 18 months. Upon landing in the Libyan capital, Akar held talks with his counterpart Salah Eddine Namrouch and then met Khaled El-Mechri, who heads the High State Council aligned with the GNA, an HSC statement said.

The Turkish and Libyan officials agreed during the talks to "pursue their coordination in a bid to repel any hostile" action by Haftar that could destabilise Libya, the statement added.

Turkish support for the GNA helped stave off the April 2019 offensive by Haftar.

During a speech on Thursday, Haftar said there would be "no peace in the presence of a coloniser on our land" and called on his forces to "get ready". "We will therefore take up arms again to fashion our peace with our own hands... and, since Turkey rejects peace and opts for war, prepare to drive out the occupier by faith, will and weapons," he said.

Libya was thrown into chaos after a 2011 NATO-backed uprising toppled and led to the killing of long-time dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

Wracked by violence since then, the North African country has become a battleground for tribal militias, extremists and mercenaries and a major gateway for desperate migrants bound for Europe.

Two rival camps now vie for power, with an eastern-based administration – backed by Haftar – pitted against the Tripoli-based GNA.

But in October the two sides struck a ceasefire agreement, which has been generally respected, setting the stage for elections at the end of next year. On Saturday, the GNA's defence minister Namrouch told local media that Libya was striving to build a military institution that respects international norms.

"The Turks have helped the GNA and we thank them for that. But now we wish to reorganise the Libyan army and inject new blood into it," he said.

Later Saturday, Akar is expected to attend a graduation ceremony in Tripoli for military cadets who were trained in Turkey as part of the cooperation with the GNA, Libyan defence ministry sources told AFP.



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Khalifa Haftar threatens to target Turkish forces in Libya
Turkey sends oil ship to eastern Med, approves Libya troop deployment

[Yemen's new government sworn in, ending months of wrangling](#)

Sat, 2020-12-26 19:41

AL-MUKALLA: Yemen's new unity government was sworn in on Saturday before President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi in Riyadh, closing months of violence and political wrangling in southern Yemen provinces that weakened the anti-Houthi bloc.

Led by Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed, the new government is formed of 24 ministers, representing major political forces in Yemen, including the powerful Southern Transitional Council (STC).

Setting the new government's priorities, the Yemeni president met with the

ministers after the ceremony, in which he ordered them to focus their attention and efforts on addressing economic woes including managing a plunging currency, boosting revenues and defeating the Houthis, official news agency SABA reported. Hadi told the ministers that Yemenis are pinning hopes on this government to restore peace and stability to the liberated provinces, revive government bodies and unify forces to confront the Iran-backed Houthis.

"We want a revival of institutions, recovery of the economy, restoration of security and a confrontation of the coup. This in short is what awaits you," Hadi said, pledging his full support and the dismissal of ineffective ministers. Addressing the ministers of defense and interior, Hadi said that the new government is responsible for merging and disarming factions, getting them under the state's control and putting into place the remaining security and military components of the Riyadh Agreement.

"We want the temporary capital Aden free of all military units. Security services must carry out their duties. We do not want conflicts after today. No more blood. Our enemy is the Houthis," he said.

During the meeting, Hadi thanked Saudi Arabia for paving the way for the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, expressing hope for a new bailout from the Kingdom to steady the country's troubled economy.

At the same time, the new prime minister said that his government is aware of the big challenges and would collectively work in accordance with agendas set by President Hadi.

After months of political stalemate, the Arab coalition announced on Dec. 11 that Yemeni parties would immediately implement security and military arrangements under the Riyadh Agreement, agreeing to form a new government when the deployment of forces came to an end.

Under the supervision of the Saudi de-escalation committee in Yemen, hundreds of military troops from the former government and the STC departed contested areas in the southern province of Abyan. Military units also withdrew from Aden and were redeployed in battlefields with the Houthis.

Positive news about the formation of the new government and its expected return to Aden have pushed the Yemeni riyal into recovering against foreign currencies. Moneychangers told Arab News on Saturday afternoon that the riyal surged to 720 against the US dollar after sinking to 920 a couple of weeks ago, shortly after ministers took the constitutional oath.



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Killing of Yemeni mother sparks outrage against Houthis COVID-19 could 'easily overwhelm' Yemen's health system, warns official

[Fire at Egyptian hospital kills 7 coronavirus patients](#)

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CAIRO: An intensive care unit at an Egyptian hospital caught fire on Saturday, killing seven coronavirus patients, officials said.

Local police said the blaze erupted at a private hospital in Obour, an outlying district of the greater Cairo area.

The fire injured at least five others. The injured and other patients were evacuated to nearby hospitals, the police said.

Firefighters were able to put out the blaze, the cause of which police and prosecutors are investigating.

The state-run Al-Ahram daily reported that an initial investigation blamed an electric short-circuit for the fire.

A similar blaze erupted at the coronavirus ward of a private hospital in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria in June, leaving seven patients dead and one injured. There was another fire in May in a coronavirus isolation center in Cairo that didn't cause any casualties.

Egypt has seen a surge in the confirmed cases of the virus, forcing the government to reopen most of its hospitals designated to treat and isolate COVID-19 patients after the first wave of the pandemic subsided.

The Health Ministry reported its highest daily number of confirmed cases on Friday at 1,113, along with 49 deaths.

The new numbers have brought the country's official tally to more than 130,126 cases, including at least 7,309 deaths.

However, the actual numbers of cases in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country with over 100 million people, are thought to be far higher, in part due to limited testing.



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