

Khalifa Haftar threatens to target Turkish forces in Libya

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By NOHA ELHENNAWY | AP

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CAIRO: A Libyan commander who launched an offensive last year to capture the capital Tripoli from the Government of National Accord (GNA) threatened Thursday to use force against Turkish troops if Ankara doesn't stop interfering in the war-stricken North African country.

Khalifa Haftar's comments came in response to the Turkish parliament's decision to extend for 18 months a law that allows the deployment of Turkish troops to Libya. Turkish military assistance to the Tripoli-based government – including advisers, equipment and intelligence – helped stop Haftar's year-long offensive on the capital. Turkey has also been accused of sending thousands of Syrian mercenaries to Libya.

"There will be no security or peace as long as the boots of the Turkish military are desecrating our immaculate soil," Haftar said in comments from his eastern stronghold, Benghazi, on the 69th anniversary of Libya's independence day. "We will carry weapons to bring about peace with our own hands and our free will."

Libya descended into chaos following the 2011 uprising that ousted and killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi. Since 2015, Libya has been divided between two governments, one in the east and one in the west.

Haftar has been allied with the eastern government, while Turkey has supported the GNA.

The Turkish lawmakers' decision came Tuesday, despite a UN-brokered cease-fire in Libya declared in October. The cease-fire deal envisioned the departure of foreign forces and mercenaries within three months.

"The colonizing enemy has one of two choices: either to leave peacefully or to be driven out by force," Haftar said, referring to Turkey.

The UN Support Mission in Libya seized the same national occasion to urge Libya's rivals to observe the cease-fire and respect a political roadmap that envisages the holding of national elections in December 2021.

"While the Mission calls on Libyans to consolidate their efforts and take courageous steps toward national reconciliation, and to look forward to a bright future for all Libyans to live in peace and prosperity, it affirms its full commitment to assisting the Libyan people in building their unified state," a UNSMIL statement issued Thursday said.

Earlier this month, 75 Libyan politicians from opposing camps convened virtually in a UN-initiated political forum and agreed to hold elections next year. However, they failed to break a deadlock on the selection mechanism for the transitional government that would run the country in the lead-up to the vote.

"A tenuous cease-fire continues to hold in Libya between forces allied to the Tripoli-based government and their rivals in the east," said a commentary

published Thursday by The International Crisis Group. “Yet there is reason to worry that the five-month hiatus in the conflict could end abruptly.” In recent weeks, both governments have traded accusations of violating the terms of the cease-fire deal by continuing to mobilize their troops near front lines and receiving military assistance from their respective regional backers.



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Turkey sends oil ship to eastern Med, approves Libya troop deployment
Egypt's president sends message of support to Libyan leaders

Most Turks want Syrian refugees to go home

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-24 22:43

ANAKARA: A new poll showed a hostile picture among Turks to the integration of Syrian refugee population in the country.

The survey, entitled "Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey 2020," was conducted by Istanbul Bilgi University in cooperation with German Marshall Fund of the United States through face-to-face interviews across 29 cities with a representative sample of 4,000 people from Turkey's adult population.

It found that 86 percent of respondents want the 4 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey to go back home, a question that has become a common denominator across almost all political parties.

More than 3.6 million refugees fled to Turkey following the civil war in Syria in 2011, but the Syrian community in Turkey has been the target of several violent attacks and murders over recent years.

Turks consider the presence of Syrian refugees as a burden on their livelihood and as a source of unfair competition in the labor market with unregistered Syrians, informal businesses and thousands of Syrian-led companies launched each year arousing great concern.

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, said that Turkey welcomed millions of Syrian refugees who were fleeing the civil war, but the current statistics showed social acceptance of refugee population was falling.

"It is a sign of a lack of Turkish leadership – of the false demonization of refugees as scapegoats for Turkey's economic and other problems – that so many people in Turkey have now turned on the refugees, even though the deadly threats to them remain the same in Syria," he told Arab News.

Deniz Senol Sert, a migration expert from Ozyegin University in Istanbul, agrees.

"During the local elections of March 2019, Turkish government used the refugee issue as a bargaining chip both domestically and at the international front. It sent the message to its own voters and to the EU that it can open the gates for letting all these refugees flood into European countries," she said.

The Turkish authorities therefore keep signaling to Turkish society that the flow of Syrian refugees is in their control, while they are also sending a warning to the EU, which is reluctant to offer visa-free access to Europe to Turkish citizens.

In the meantime, Sert added, the government legitimized its controversial cross-border military operations into Syria with a so-called safe zone project to settle all refugees living in Turkey.

“Syrian refugees in Turkey are well aware that they are not welcomed by the host community. They even face serious obstacles when they try to open new business in Turkey although it is a kind of integration tool for this community. Neither the government nor the opposition parties can produce a pro-integration discourse to change these worrying statistics in a positive direction,” she said.

Last year, Turkish government approved the deportation of 1,000 Syrians in a week from Istanbul to Syria’s Idlib province, sparking debate about the timing of the move.

Sert said that the projects that involve Syrians are mostly conducted with a top-down approach, although in the European countries the municipalities assume this responsibility because they know the real problems and expectations on the ground.

“There are ideological and structural deficiencies that push people to consolidate their anti-refugee stance, and this trend feeds into frequent racist attacks on Syrians in Turkey,” she said.

In October, a Syrian refugee named Muhammed Dip Hurih was killed in a dispute with his Turkish neighbors over parking in the southeastern province of Gaziantep, while in the same month a 14-year-old Syrian child was stabbed to death in central Anatolia.

On Thursday, the European Commission has extended two humanitarian flagship programs in Turkey until early 2022 to provide basic needs to more than 1.8 million refugees and assist more than 700,000 children to continue their education.

But the EU programs are not seen as enough to boost integration by the society at large, with Turkish government accusing Brussels of falling short on its commitments of financial support.

Similarly, Syrians Barometer, a survey released last year under the coordination of Murat Erdogan, a professor at the Turkish-German University in Istanbul, showed that Turkish society considers the issue of Syrians as one of its top 3 problems.

“The Syrian refugees have turned into a politicized topic that reflects the already established political divisions within the society. The voters of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) follow their party’s political line, while the opposition designs its emotional stance according to their political disapprovals,” Prof. Erdogan said.

“Even in places such as southeastern Sanliurfa province, known for its multicultural characteristics, 70 percent of residents are against street signs in Arabic. The first flow of Syrian refugees has been perceived as a project of the ruling government to change local demographics. Granting

citizenships to the Syrian refugees were also perceived negatively by different segments of the society,” he added.

However, Prof. Erdogan also underlines that his survey showed that 85 percent of Turkish citizens prefer isolating Syrian refugees in camps or in safe zones rather than having them integrated into the society.



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Refugees help put ancient Syrian glass collection on display in Scotland 'In our hearts': Radio keeps Syria refugees in Iraq close to home

[Israeli court halts desecration of Muslim cemetery](#)

Thu, 2020-12-24 22:28

AMMAN: The Jerusalem District Court issued a temporary restraining order against the city's Israeli-run municipality on Thursday, forcing the municipality to cease its conversion of the waqf-owned Al-Yousefieh cemetery into a park.

In a press statement issued on Wednesday, the Jordanian Foreign Ministry's

spokesperson, Dhaifallah Fayez, reiterated Jordan's "rejection and condemnation of the excavations and leveling works carried out by the Israeli authorities at the cemetery's fence and stairs." Jordan described the action as "desecration of graves" and called on the Israelis to immediately stop the operation.

Wasfi Kailani, senior official on Jerusalem Affairs and director of the Hashemite Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque, told Arab News, "The case is important because it sheds a light on the continued acts of desecration against a cemetery that is still being used these days by Jerusalem's Muslims. This is a documented waqf property and the cemetery – which is named after the son of Salah Eddine, Yusef bin Ayoub – is sacred to Muslims around the world, especially for Jordan and the Arab Legion (the former Jordanian army)."

Kailani said that official complaints had been filed with the Israeli government and UNESCO in 2014 and 2016. "We have known for some time that Israel had its eyes on this land near the wall adjacent to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Lion's Gate," he said, adding that those complaints had included "documentation of Israeli authorities pouring concrete below and over existing graves in order to stop Muslims (burying) their dead at this location."

The municipality's plans for the park reportedly include a memorial erected by Jerusalemites with the approval of former Israeli mayor Teddy Kosleck to honor members of the Jordanian army who were killed in the 1967 war. Kailani claimed that would cause emotional hurt and damage to the families of the dead.

"Imagine the reaction of families of these brave Jordanian soldiers who are buried at the site as they see kids playing and dancing on the graves of their deceased martyrs," he said.

Palestinian lawyers Muhaad Jabara and Hamzeh Quteieh told Arab News that the court's decision means that the municipality's actions were illegal.



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Silent night for Bethlehem as coronavirus keeps pilgrims away
Gaza Christians face canceled Christmas amid pandemic

[Pompeo says US has started work to set up consulate in Western Sahara](#)

Author:

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WASHINGTON: The US State Department said on Thursday it began the process to set up a US consulate in Western Sahara, after President Donald Trump's administration this month recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the region. In a departure from longstanding US policy, Washington agreed to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, a desert region where a decades-old territorial dispute has pitted Morocco against the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a breakaway movement that seeks to establish an independent state.

The recognition was part of a US-brokered deal in which Morocco became the

fourth Arab country after the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan to normalize ties with Israel in the past four months.

“Effective immediately, we are inaugurating a virtual presence post for Western Sahara, with a focus on promoting economic and social development, to be followed soon by a fully functioning consulate,” US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

“This virtual presence post will be managed by the US Embassy in Rabat,” Pompeo said, adding that Washington would be continuing to support political negotiations to resolve the issues between Morocco and the Polisario within the framework of Morocco’s autonomy plan.

Washington’s support for Moroccan sovereignty over the desert territory represents the biggest policy concession the United States has made so far in its quest to win Arab recognition of Israel.

The series of normalization deals have been driven in part by US-led efforts to present a united front against Iran and roll back Tehran’s regional influence.

President-elect Joe Biden, due to succeed Trump on Jan. 20, will face a decision whether to accept the US deal on the Western Sahara, which no other Western nation has done. Western nations and the UN have long called for a referendum to resolve the dispute.



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US adopts map of Morocco that includes Western Sahara‘Foreign maneuvers’ in

COVID-19 could 'easily overwhelm' Yemen's health system, warns official

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-24 22:25

Al-Mukalla: COVID-19 could “easily overwhelm” Yemen’s health system and tougher measures could be re-imposed to stop transmission of the disease, an official said Thursday.

Dr. Ishraq Al-Subaee, a spokeswoman for the Aden-based National Coronavirus Committee, said the body had alerted all of the country’s air, sea and land entry points about negative PCR test requirements for travelers to Yemen to be implemented from Friday.

The committee may also suggest imposing harsher measures, including closing airports and border crossings if the disease spread in the country.

“This is an easily transmissible disease that can overwhelm Yemen’s health system. There are still shortages of ventilators and other important equipment,” she told Arab News, adding that the country could re-impose a lockdown and ban gatherings to stop transmission.

In its latest bulletin on Monday, the committee announced recording zero confirmed cases or deaths in government-controlled provinces. The total number of confirmed cases since April 10 is 2,087, including 1,384 recoveries. But local media reports said that several new cases had been detected in Aden and the central province of Al-Bayda.

Local health officials and experts previously told Arab News that the pandemic had reached all parts of the country and the number of cases was much higher than official figures.

Yemen shut its borders and airports in March and imposed a 24-hour lockdown on some cities to stem the spread of the virus. Yemenis have, however, largely flouted health guidelines by taking part in large gatherings, arranging funerals and weddings and travelling around the country.

Despite demanding more funds and equipment to help the country’s health system prepare for a new strain, Al-Subaee said that medical workers were more experienced on dealing with the pandemic than when the virus first hit the country.

“This time we are more prepared than before in terms of training and skills. Medical workers can now cope with any new shock.”

Critics and experts argued that the latest measures would not curb the spread of the new variant as travellers would continue arriving in the country. Thousands of African migrants have crossed into Yemen since January despite the conflict and pandemic.

The committee's latest decision sparked panic among Yemenis abroad, who saw it as a prelude to shutting down borders. People rushed to travel agencies and the offices of national carrier Yemenia in Cairo and other cities to change their departure to earlier dates, a travel agency worker told Arab News.

Thousands of Yemenis abroad were stranded in April due to coronavirus lockdowns.

Local medical workers have told Arab News of a sharp decrease in the number of coronavirus cases, mainly in densely populated cities with daily updates at zero cases.

Dr. Ahmed Mansour, a spokesman for the National Coronavirus Committee in the southern city of Taiz, said that local PCR labs in the city had recorded zero confirmed cases despite testing hundreds of people since September.

"We take daily almost 30 samples of people who gather outside the passport department since they come from Taiz and other provinces. Results are all negative. Tests also showed that even the new variant of the virus has not arrived in Taiz," he said.

He called for the Yemeni government and international donors to provide health and quarantine facilities in Taiz with personal protective equipment and testing kits.

"We are still in need of medical equipment and protective equipment for coronavirus."

Earlier in the week, Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed said that the new government would ask the World Bank and international donors to fund COVID-19 vaccine shipments to Yemen because the country was unable to buy the jab.

He said that the new health minister and authorities would contact international donors about getting funds for vaccine distribution.

"We need support from the international community with regard to vaccines," the prime minister added.



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Saudi Ministry of Culture to preserve Yemeni cultural heritage
Yemen to require COVID-19 test for travelers into the country