

# What is the US aiming for by lifting the Cyprus arms embargo?

Sat, 2020-09-05 01:10

ANKARA: A new element has been introduced to ongoing disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announcing on Tuesday that a 1987 arms embargo on Cyprus was being partially lifted.

Experts are divided about Washington's motive and whether this decision is connected to Ankara's maneuvers in contested waters where it is drilling for gas.

The US decision, which was strongly criticized by Turkey's Foreign Affairs Ministry on Wednesday, gives the green light for non-lethal weapons sales to Cyprus for a year. Turkey made it clear that it would take unilateral action if Washington did not reconsider its decision.

Ankara said that the US move might discourage Greek leaders from engaging in long-standing reunification talks with the Turkish side of Cyprus.

But for Aaron Stein, who is director of the Middle East program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the US decision was about Russia rather than Turkey.

"There is a strain of American thinking that is pushing for a US effort to begin to push back against Russian influence on the island," he told Arab News.

Under the 2019 Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, Washington has boosted ties with Greece and Cyprus and provided them with security assistance in a bid to stop Russian military vessels from docking and refueling at Cyprus' Limassol Port.

According to Stein, Turkey is so unpopular that it has no support in US Congress to stop these efforts. "So, the US State Department folks that were pushing this line were able to get it through," he added.

In the meantime, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced late Thursday that Greece and Turkey had agreed to enter into technical talks under NATO auspices to "establish deconfliction mechanisms and reduce the risk of incidents and accidents" in the eastern Mediterranean.

Joe Macaron, a Middle East foreign policy analyst at the Arab Center, thought there were growing voices inside the US administration that were pressuring President Donald Trump to push back against Turkish policy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

"And this pressure will only increase now that Turkey has signed a contract to deliver the second batch of Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems," he told Arab News.

In late August Ankara and Moscow reportedly signed a contract to deliver a second consignment of air defense systems to Turkey, making it the first NATO member to buy such a system from Russia.

Macaron said that the pressure was evident in the recent US condemnation of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's meeting with Hamas, and now this partial lifting of the arms embargo on Cyprus. Both were issued by the US State Department not the White House, which meant Trump wanted to keep the lines

open with Erdogan.

“The US is taking some distance from Turkey without necessarily siding with France in the Eastern Mediterranean tensions, as this decision is valid for 1 year only and is restricted to nonlethal military equipment,” Macaron said. Greece and Turkey, which are both conducting extensive research for energy in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, have conflicting understandings of maritime boundaries together with the long-standing quarrel between Turkey and Cyprus over offshore gas reserves around the divided island since 1974. Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, agreed that the US decision was part of an effort to distance Cyprus from Russia.

“The timing may be related to the upcoming US elections as there are around 1.4 million Americans with Greek descent as opposed to around 350,000 Americans with Turkish descent,” he told Arab News.

Nevertheless, Unluhisarcikli added, while this move would not change the military balance on the island in any way, the timing was unfortunate as it may be perceived by Greek Cypriots as an endorsement of their current policy and disincentivize the start of dialogue with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus on the exploitation of the island’s energy resources.

In the meantime, Brussels is expected to discuss a list of possible sanctions against Turkey during a leaders’ meeting later this month.



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French schools in Turkey on shaky ground Turkey must drop ‘threats’ for talks to begin: Greek PM

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## French schools in Turkey on shaky ground

Sat, 2020-09-05 01:03

ANKARA: Amid a diplomatic escalation of tension between Turkey and France over the East Mediterranean, the closure of French schools both in Ankara and Istanbul ranks high on the agenda of the Turkish government.

On Thursday, Turkey's pro-government press Yeni Safak called for the closure of French schools Lycée Pierre Loti and Lycée Charles de Gaulle, in Istanbul and Ankara, respectively, claiming that the schools were "illegally" founded and unlawfully operating on Turkish territories. A significant part of the Turkish business elite, as well as many journalists and members of academia, are graduates from French schools in Turkey, the roots of which stretch back to Ottoman times.

For the past few years, Ankara has been exploring ways to open Turkish state-controlled schools in French territories based on the reciprocity principle. However, in the context of the longstanding quarrel between French and Turkish leaders, education in a secular country like France remains a controversial and highly sensitive subject.

Last year, France insisted on training "local" imams to preach to its Muslim communities rather than letting Turkey send imams as a way to increase its soft power in the interests of Ankara.

"Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's legacy is almost destroying Turkey's secular education system," Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told Arab News.

According to Cagaptay, there are very few schools left that are sheltered from Erdogan's ideological re-crafting of Turkey's educational system.

"And these French schools are part of this minority. It is an unfortunate move. Even religious parents are avoiding sending their children to religious schools because at the end of the day, the issue is whether Turkey's education system is preparing its citizens to be competitive in a 21st century economy," he said.

Erdi Ozturk, a lecturer in International Relations and Politics at London Metropolitan University, said Turkey has lost its credibility to a significant extent due to its recent domestic and international moves.

"It still has some friends, but several European countries have turned their backs to Turkey, including France. From 2015-2019, there were many debates about spying activities and the influence of Turkey's state apparatus over its nationals living in France. Imams and teachers who were appointed by Turkey have been allegedly used as a polarization tool over the Turkish diaspora," he told Arab News.

Ozturk describes this as "transnational authoritarianism."

"It is completely reasonable that countries go beyond their national boundaries to exert influence. But I think Turkey implemented this strategy in an unprofessional manner, thus triggering a reaction from France. Now with

Macron loudly voicing his anti-Turkey discourse, the Erdogan regime has taken this opportunity to use counter-tools because the ruling government rejects multi-culturalism in its regime based on ethno-nationalism," he said. Experts think the recent re-conversion of the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque marks a turning point and shows how capable the Turkish government is of turning its rhetoric into practice.

"After the controversial Hagia Sophia move, there is nothing that Erdogan can't do. If the Erdogan regime proceeds with the closure of French schools, it will be not only a tool to consolidate its state identity, but it will further undermine Franco-Turkish relations," Ozturk said.



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Turkey must drop 'threats' for talks to begin: Greek PM  
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## [Image of Palestinian under Israeli soldier's knee sparks outrage](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-09-05 00:42

JERUSALEM: Footage of an Israeli soldier throwing a Palestinian activist to

the ground and kneeling on his neck has sparked outrage in the Palestinian territories and beyond.

The protester, named as Khairi Hanoun, a man in his late 60s, took part in demonstrations on Tuesday near Tulkarm, in the north of the West Bank, against moves to extend a neighboring Israeli settlement.

Footage taken by AFP in recent weeks at different protests has shown him shouting at Israeli soldiers.

Hanoun was also involved in Tuesday's demonstration at a road bordering the village of Shufah, between Nablus and Tulkarm.

He was seen waving a Palestinian flag, along with dozens of other protesters, and watched by several journalists.

In video footage, Hanoun appeared to touch an Israeli soldier, who then pushed him to the ground, putting his knee on his neck as he secured his hands with a plastic tie.

Edited footage of the incident has been circulating on social media and Palestinian television channels.

Several are posted with the hashtag #PalestinianLivesMatter.

They compare the image with George Floyd, an unarmed African American killed in police custody, who was photographed with police kneeling on his neck.

Saeb Erakat, secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, wrote on Twitter on Wednesday about the images condemning the "aggression."

## **HIGHLIGHT**

**Edited footage of the incident has been circulating on social media and Palestinian television channels.**

The Islamist movement Hamas, in power in the Gaza Strip, said "such acts" were among the "main causes" of tensions in the region.

However, Israel's army said the images did not show the extent of the confrontation.

"We emphasize that the videos on social media are partial, heavily edited and do not reflect the violent riot nor the violence against IDF (Israeli) troops that happened prior to the apprehension," the army said.

Israel's army said "a Palestinian known as an inciter" had "shoved" a soldier "a number of times."

According to the army, soldiers "showed restraint" but "were forced to apprehend the suspect that repeatedly assaulted them."

Soldiers provided medical care after his arrest, the statement added.

Hamas and Israel have fought three wars since 2008.

Despite a truce last year backed by the UN, Egypt and Qatar, the two sides clash sporadically with rockets, mortar fire or incendiary balloons.

The Gaza Strip has a population of two million, more than half of whom live in poverty, according to the World Bank.

Palestinian analysts say fire from Gaza often aims to pressure Israel to give the green light for the transfer of Qatari financial aid into the strip.



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## [Artificial Intelligence helps counter COVID-19 misinformation in Arabic](#)

Fri, 2020-09-04 23:52

CAIRO: With most credible information on COVID-19 and its symptoms supplied in English, Arabic-speaking populations have faced a significant barrier, falling prey to hysterical and inaccurate social media posts that come from questionable sources.

This urgent and potentially life-threatening problem was quickly identified by the team at DxWand, an Egyptian startup providing conversational artificial intelligence (AI) solutions – and they sought a fast and effective fix for it.

“In late February, we, as a team, were struggling to find credible information about COVID-19, and we found that one needs certain access to

find credible information,” said Ahmed Mahmoud, co-founder of DxWand.

“That made us think about others who would find it challenging to make a distinction between credible and false information. Even on official websites it was sometimes hard to find an answer to a specific question. Or worse – you would get your information from social media.”

Enter Ask Nameesa, the startup’s newest conversational AI solution. The DxWand team has fed it all available databases on the precautions and symptoms around COVID-19. The databases are built on credible WHO information, as well as information and updates from local health authorities. The best part? It even answers questions using “day-to-day” language, such as Egyptian slang.

“One would only need to ask Nameesa a question via Facebook messenger or WhatsApp and it will respond within a few minutes with the most credible information it can find in its database, in Egyptian, Arabic or English,” Mahmoud said.

As an AI solution, Ask Nameesa has the ability to independently build up its knowledge based on the inquiries it receives, slowly broadening its scope and ability to answer very specific questions.



“Users make a valuable contribution to Ask Nameesa,” Mahmoud said. “It started with 22 knowledge-based items or categories; today, it has more than 200, and that comes from subcategories that people ask about, for instance, questions specific to COVID-19 and pregnant women or COVID-19 and alcohol consumption. If you try to find an answer to such questions online, you’d have to read lengthy articles, and you may or may not find the answer. Nameesa does that job for you and gets back to you with the most accurate information available.”

In a testament to its potential, Ask Nameesa was selected among the top 89 solutions out of more than 18,000 in the global #BuildforCOVID19 hackathon sponsored by the likes of Microsoft, Facebook and Google. It was only one of two regional creations to make it to the very top.

It also quickly garnered more than 50,000 followers on Facebook, which

inspired the team to look into further expanding on it.

“We’re working on making Nameesa’s services sustainable and increase its reach geographically and demographically, which needs a bit of investment, so we’re looking into that,” Mahmoud said.

“It would also be of great value if we can collaborate with health care authorities so they can update the knowledge database with medication protocols for users who are reporting symptoms of COVID-19. We’re in discussion about that with authorities in the UAE and may soon launch a similar service there.”

However, it is not just tackling misinformation about COVID-19 that is on DxWand’s to-do list, Mahmoud said. The next step for the team could be building a fully fledged personalized health-care solution.

“We are looking into expanding the service beyond COVID-19 so that the platform or solution can basically build up knowledge on your medical record and then provide information about any care plan you should follow. It then follows up to make sure you’re complying with the plan or (determine) if changes are needed. The future is personalized care, not just for COVID-19,” he said.

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## [Sudanese government, key rebel group to restart peace talks](#)

Sat, 2020-09-05 00:53

CAIRO: Sudan's transitional government and a powerful rebel group that controls large swaths of the country's restive south said on Friday they have agreed to resume peace talks, a development that boosts hopes of ending the country's decades-long civil wars.

The commitment comes days after the government reached a deal with other rebel groups to quell conflicts stemming from the rule of ousted ruler Omar Bashir.

The Sudan Liberation Movement-North, led by Abdel-Aziz Al-Hilu, and Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok signed a joint letter of intention late Thursday in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, stressing the "necessity" of finding "a comprehensive and just political solution" to the conflicts. It did not specify when the talks would restart.

Negotiating an end to the rebellions in Sudan's far-flung provinces has been a crucial goal for the transitional government, which took power after the military overthrew Bashir in April last year, following months of pro-democracy protests. Cash-strapped authorities are keen to slash military spending, which takes up 80 percent of the national budget.

Al-Hilu's faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement-North, also known as SLPM-North, is Sudan's single largest rebel group. It engaged in previous rounds of peace talks but remained skeptical of the country's ruling Sovereign Council, comprised of both civilian leaders and military generals, including some from Al-Bashir's tenure.

## **SPEEDREAD**

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Along with another major rebel group, the faction skipped the signing of the agreement earlier this week in South Sudan between the government and a rebel alliance known as the Sudan Revolutionary Front, dimming prospects for meaningful change on the ground.

The SLPM-North has also threatened to call for self-determination in the vast areas it controls if its demands are not met. Just days ago, Al-Hilu accused the transitional government of adopting the "evasive" tactics of Bashir's administration throughout tortuous peace negotiations that have dragged on for nearly a year.

To lay the groundwork for a future deal, Al-Hilu and Hamdok agreed in principle on a range of political issues that have frustrated efforts to reach a deal in the past.

Sudan's constitution "should be based on the principle of separation of religion and state," the statement said, acknowledging a long-held demand of the ardently secularist SLPM-North. The sides also agreed to let the rebel group retain its weapons until they ink an accord calling for new security arrangements.

Al-Hilu's movement controls large chunks of territory in the war-scarred Blue Nile and South Kordofan provinces, home to a significant Christian minority that long complained of discrimination under Bashir.

During Bashir's 30 years in power, the Khartoum government extended Islamic rule in Sudan and fanned tensions between the Muslim majority north and mainly Christian and animist south, precipitating brutal wars and ultimately, the secession of South Sudan in 2011.



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