

Italy-Libya deal puts migrants in danger, say rights group

Author:

Wed, 2020-02-12 23:43

CAIRO: Human Rights Watch warned on Wednesday that Italy's renewed support for the Libyan coast guard is putting migrants in danger who are returned to squalid detention centers in the North African country.

Italy sees the Libyan coast guard as key to stemming a huge influx of migrants crossing the Mediterranean into Europe. The war in Libya, where rival militias are vying for control, has made the challenge of handling the migrant flows worse.

The New York-based watchdog urged Italy to suspend all funding and training for the coast guard until Libya shuts down militant-run detention centers in the country. About 5,000 migrants are languishing in dozens of filthy Libyan centers, where rape, torture and other abuses run rampant.

"Italy can't paper over its complicity in the suffering of migrants and refugees who fall into the hands of the Libyan Coast Guard," said Judith Sunderland, associate director of the Europe and Central Asia division at Human Rights Watch.

The UN refugee agency reports that the coast guard has picked up and returned roughly 40,000 migrants to war-ravaged Libya since the agreement was reached three years ago. The total number of migrants intercepted in the past month rose 121 percent from the same period last year.

Italy recently extended its contentious deal supporting the Libyan coast guard, drawing sharp criticism from humanitarian groups.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Italy's foreign minister revealed that Rome has asked Libya to modify the accord to give humanitarian groups some responsibility for migrants intercepted by the coast guard. The proposal's details remain vague.

Sunderland described the suggested changes as "tweaking" an already broken arrangement.

"Italian authorities should insist on the closure of detention centers, direct its resources to supporting safe alternatives to detention, increase evacuations from Libya, including directly to Italy, and resume a leadership role in saving lives at sea," she said.



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Aid ship with 403 migrants rescued off Libya docks in ItalyHRW criticizes Italy, EU's Libya migrant policy

[Syria: US troops open fire on locals in northeast, killing 1](#)

Author:

By ALBERT AJI and ANDREW WILKS | AP

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1581530262888796700

Wed, 2020-02-12 14:31

DAMASCUS: A Syrian was killed and another was wounded in a rare clash Wednesday between American troops and a group of government supporters who tried to block a US convoy driving through a village in northeastern Syria, state media and activists reported.

The state-run media said the killed man was a civilian. He was among residents of a village east of the town of Qamishli who had gathered at an

army checkpoint, pelting the US convoy with stones and taking down a US flag from one of the vehicles. At that point, American troops fired with live ammunition and smoke bombs at the residents, the reports said.

A US military spokesman said coalition forces conducting a patrol near Qamishli encountered a checkpoint occupied by pro-Syrian government forces. After coalition troops issued a series of warnings in an attempt to de-escalate the situation, the patrol came under small-arms fire from unknown individuals, coalition spokesman Myles Caggins said.

"In self-defense, coalition troops returned fire. The situation was de-escalated and is under investigation," he added in a statement.

Air Force Lt. Col. Carla Gleason, traveling with the US defense secretary in Brussels, said no Americans were killed in the incident.

Hundreds of US troops are stationed in northeastern Syria, working with their local partners from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces to fight against the Daesh group. The US carries out patrols in northeastern Syria, but it was not immediately clear why the convoy drove into a government-controlled area. The incident marks a rare confrontation involving US and Syrian troops in the crowded region where Russian forces are also deployed – and is certain to further escalate tensions.

State-run Al-Ikhbariya TV aired a cellphone video showing an armored vehicle flying a US flag standing on a rural road while a car appeared to be blocking its way.

Locals are seen walking past the US armored vehicle, with at least two soldiers inside, one of whom steps down as civilians approach. One civilian is seen tearing a US flag as he approaches the soldier.

The TV said protests spread, preventing reinforcements from coming to help the US convoy. The report said the wounded civilian and was being treated at the Qamishli hospital.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said residents and armed pro-government militiamen in Khirbet Ammu blocked the path of a US convoy. The militia fired in the air, prompting the American troops to fire smoke bombs. Tension escalated and US troops killed one person, the Observatory said.

The Observatory, which has a network of activists on the ground, said it is not clear if the killed was a civilian or a militia member. The Observatory also said that a Russian convoy arrived on the scene to defuse the tension.

The Syrian war, now in its ninth year, has pulled in international players including the US, Russia and Turkey. Russia has supported President Bashar Assad's government, while Turkey is the rebels' main backer.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Wednesday that Turkey will attack Syrian government forces anywhere in Syria if another Turkish soldier is hurt. He added that Turkey is determined to force the Syrian military back from the gains it has made in the northwestern province of Idlib by the end of February.

"As of today, in the event of any minor harm to our soldiers, I announce that we will strike regime forces everywhere without being bound to Idlib or the boundaries of the Sochi agreement," Erdogan told a ruling party meeting in Ankara.

Forces loyal to Assad, backed by Russian air cover, have been advancing into the last rebel-held areas of Idlib and nearby Aleppo countryside, seizing dozens of towns and sparking a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

Under a 2018 agreement with Russia in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Turkey

established a dozen military observation posts in Idlib, where it backs some opposition groups. Several of these posts have been surrounded by government forces in recent weeks.

At least 13 Turkish soldiers have been killed by Syrian artillery fire this month.

Erdogan said he had spoken to Russian President Vladimir Putin by telephone about the situation in Idlib.

The Kremlin said that the phone conversation underlined the need to fully implement the Russian-Turkish agreements.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov added that despite a pledge by Turkey, militants in Idlib have continued to launch attacks on Syrian troops and threaten Russian facilities in Syria. "It's inadmissible and it runs contrary to the Sochi agreements," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.



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Russia accuses Turkey of aggravating situation in Syria's Idlib

[Lebanon formally requests IMF technical help for rescue plan](#)

Wed, 2020-02-12 20:59

BEIRUT: Lebanon formally requested technical assistance from the IMF on Wednesday, asking the Fund to send a team to Beirut to help draw up a comprehensive plan to escape financial collapse, a senior government source told Reuters.

As the government grapples with an economic crisis that has fuelled increasingly violent protests, heavily indebted Lebanon must urgently decide on how to deal with fast approaching debt payments including a \$1.2 billion Eurobond due on March 9.

The financial crisis, worse than any Lebanon endured in its 1975-90 civil war, came to a head last year as slowing capital inflows led to a liquidity crunch and demonstrations erupted against the ruling elite.

Deciding how to handle Lebanon's next sovereign debt maturity is a top priority for Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government which won a vote of confidence in parliament on Tuesday.

The IMF technical team is expected to arrive in Beirut in the next few days to help draw up an economic, financial, and monetary plan, said the senior government source, adding that the request for help was made by phone on Wednesday.

It was not immediately clear whether the technical assistance would involve a plan for debt restructuring, though some politicians have expressed support for consulting the IMF before any plan is put forward to manage the debt payments.

A decision on the March Eurobond was expected in Beirut on Thursday at a meeting between the president, central bank governor, finance minister and others, a second government source said.

Lebanon was seeking advice on the March Eurobond "amid concerns that any reprofiling of Lebanon's debt should be conducted in an orderly way to avoid damaging the country's banking system," the second government source said.

Lebanese banks holding the bulk of the sovereign debt have piled pressure on the state to pay the March Eurobond on time. The banks have in recent months imposed tough controls on hard currency amid dwindling reserves and fears of capital flight.

In London, two of Lebanon's international corporate creditors, Greylock Capital and Mangart Advisors, said they and others had organised an "informal discussion group" to begin evaluating options.

Another source familiar with the matter said that "since the government gave the nod for IMF technical help, the general mood is towards doing an orderly restructuring".

"The feeling here is that the government would like a restructuring – not to pay – and to set terms on how to pay and when to pay," a fourth source familiar with the matter said.

Senior political sources said the major parties that back the Diab government, notably the heavily armed Hezbollah, favoured reaching a deal to avoid paying the debt as Lebanon needed its foreign currency to pay for essential imports.



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Lebanon's banking association calls for paying March Eurobond on time
Lebanon needs IMF technical help, advice on Eurobond

[**UN identifies dozens of firms linked to Israeli settlements including**](#)

Airbnb, Booking.com and Motorola

Author:

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1581523822328332900

Wed, 2020-02-12 16:07

GENEVA: The UN has released a list of 112 companies with activities in Israeli settlements, which are considered illegal under international law, including Airbnb, Expedia and TripAdvisor. The move was cheered by the Palestinians but slammed as “shameful” by Israel, where officials fear the list could be used to boycott firms with ties to the settlements.

The UN report comes in response to a 2016 UN Human Rights Council resolution calling for a “database for all businesses engaged in specific activities related to Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.” The UN rights office said that listing companies in the database was “not, and does not purport to be, a judicial or quasi-judicial process.” Among the businesses on the list are a range of large international companies, including Airbnb, Alstom, Booking.com and Motorola Solutions. “I am conscious this issue has been, and will continue to be, highly contentious,” UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet said.

But she added that the findings had been subject to an “extensive and meticulous review process” and the report “reflects the serious consideration that has been given to this unprecedented and highly complex mandate.” Israel, which routinely accuses the UN and especially the Human Rights Council of bias against it was quick to slam Wednesday’s publication. “It is a shameful surrender to pressure from countries and organizations who want to harm Israel,” Foreign Minister Israel Katz said in a statement. His Palestinian counterpart Riyad Al-Malki meanwhile described the publication as “a victory for international law and diplomatic efforts.” The database was scheduled to be released three years ago, but has repeatedly been delayed.

The rights office initially evaluated more than 300 companies. But the final report published Wednesday cited 112 business entities that the office had “reasonable grounds to conclude have been involved in one or more of the specific activities referenced” in the 2016 resolution. It said 94 of the listed companies had their headquarters in Israel, while 18 others were spread across six other countries.

The UN agency said compiling the database had been a “complex process” involving “widespread discussions” with states, think tanks, academics and the companies themselves.

Human Rights Watch’s deputy advocacy chief Bruno Stagno celebrated the publication of the database. This “should put all companies on notice: to do business with illegal settlements is to aid in the commission of war crimes,” he said. Wednesday’s report meanwhile stressed that companies were not doomed to remain on the database forever.

“Where there are reasonable grounds to believe that... the business enterprise

is ceasing or no longer involved in the relevant activity, the business enterprise would be removed from the database,” it said.

The report recommended that the database be updated annually, and urged the Human Rights Council to appoint a group of independent experts to handle this task.

Israeli settlements established in occupied Palestinian territory are considered to violate international law, and have long been seen as a major obstacle to peace, since they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

More than 600,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank and east Jerusalem among three million Palestinians, with tensions often high.



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Trump deal makes 'Swiss cheese' Palestinian state, Abbas tells UN Security Council
Palestinians rally against Trump plan amid struggle at UN

[Iranian-backed Hezbollah stepping in to guide Iraqi militias after death of](#)

Qassem Soleimani

Author:

Reuters

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Tue, 2020-02-11 15:48

BAGHDAD: Shortly after Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani was killed in a US drone strike in Iraq, the Tehran-backed Lebanese organization Hezbollah urgently met with Iraqi militia leaders, seeking to unite them in the face of a huge void left by their powerful mentor's death, two sources with knowledge of the meetings told Reuters.

The meetings were meant to coordinate the political efforts of Iraq's often-fractious militias, which lost not only Soleimani but also Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, a unifying Iraqi paramilitary commander, in the Jan. 3 attack at Baghdad airport, the sources said.

While offering few details, two additional sources in a pro-Iran regional alliance confirmed that Hezbollah, which is sanctioned as a terrorist group by the US, has stepped in to help fill the void left by Soleimani in guiding the militias. All sources in this article spoke on condition of anonymity to address sensitive political activities rarely addressed in public. Officials with the governments of Iraq and

Iran did not respond to requests for comment, nor did a spokesperson for the militia groups.



Iranian clerics are seen during the forty days memorial, after the killing of Iran's Quds Force top commander Qassem Soleimani and the Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a US air strike at Baghdad airport. (Reuters)

The discussions shed light on how Iran and its allied groups are trying to cement control in the unstable Middle East, especially in the wake of the devastating US attack on a revered Iranian military leader.

The Tehran-backed militias are critical to Iran's efforts to maintain control over Iraq, where the US still maintains some 5,000 troops. The country has experienced years of civil war since US forces toppled Saddam Hussein and more recently, the government – and the militias – have faced growing protests against Iran's influence in the country. Iran helped found some Iraqi militia groups.

In the months ahead of his death, Soleimani had waded ever deeper into the Iraq crisis, holding meetings with the Iraqi militias in Baghdad as Tehran sought to defend its allies and interests in its power struggle with the United States, one of the two Iraqi sources said.

Hezbollah's involvement marks an expansion of its role in the region. The Shiite group, founded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards in 1982, has been at the heart of Iran's regional strategy for years, helping Soleimani to train paramilitary groups in both Iraq and Syria.

One pro-Iran regional official said Hezbollah's guidance of the militias would continue until the new leadership in the Quds Force – a unit of the

Revolutionary Guards led by Soleimani since 1998 – gets a handle on the political crisis in Iraq.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

The meetings between Hezbollah and Iraqi militia leaders began in January, just days after Soleimani's assassination, the two Iraqi sources said. Reuters couldn't confirm the number of meetings or where they took place. One source said they were in Beirut and the other said they were either in Lebanon or Iran.

Sheikh Mohammad Al-Kawtharani, the Hezbollah representative in Iraq who worked closely with Soleimani for years to guide the Iraqi militias, hosted the meetings, the Iraqi sources said.

Kawtharani picked up where Soleimani left off, the Iraqi sources said. The sources said Kawtharani berated the groups, as Soleimani had done in one of his final meetings with them, for failing to come up with a unified plan to contain popular protests against the Baghdad government and the paramilitaries that dominate it. The government and militia groups have killed hundreds of protesters but not managed to contain the rebellion.

Kawtharani also urged a united front in picking a new Iraqi prime minister, the Iraqi sources said. Since then, former Iraqi communications minister Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi has been named – a development welcomed by Iran and accepted by the militia-linked parties it backs but opposed by protesters.

FASTFACT

Death of Qassem Soleimani

A US air strike killed Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani, 62, and six others after they had landed at Baghdad's international airport in January.

For now, Kawtharani is seen as the most suitable figure to direct Iraqi militias until a permanent Iranian successor can be chosen, although he possesses nowhere near Soleimani's clout and charisma, according to the two Iraqi sources and a senior Iraqi Shi'ite Muslim leader.

"Kawtharani has connections with the militia groups," the Shi'ite leader said, noting that he was born in Najaf, lived in Iraq for decades and speaks Iraqi dialect. "He was trusted by Soleimani, who used to depend and call on him to help him in crises and in meetings in Baghdad."

One of the Iraqi sources close to the militias said that Kawtharani also met

with the Iraqi populist cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr, a powerful but unpredictable figure, to convince him to support the new Iraqi prime minister. As Reuters has reported, Sadr has given Allawi his support.



Kawtharani will face serious – perhaps insurmountable- challenges in filling the shoes of the leaders killed in the drone attack, the Iraqi sources close to the militias told Reuters.

“A lot of faction leaders see themselves as too big and important to take orders from ” one Iraqi source said. “For now, because of pressure from Iran, they’re cooperating with him, but I doubt that will continue and the Iranians know that.”

One of the pro-Iran sources, a military commander, said Hezbollah’s involvement would consist of political guidance but stop short of providing manpower and materiel to retaliate for the Solemani killing. The militias “do not need Hezbollah’s intervention because they have the strength in numbers, combat experience and firepower,” the commander said.



An Iranian cleric is seen during the forty days memorial, after the killing of Iran’s Quds Force top commander Qassem Soleimani and the Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a US air strike at Baghdad airport.

(Reuters)

Those groups are difficult to control while Hezbollah is seen as more disciplined. But like the rest of Iran’s network, Hezbollah risks stretching itself thin, a senior US official in the region and an Iraqi political leader

said.

In recent years, Hezbollah's role has grown considerably. It has fought in support of President Bashar Assad in Syria and extended political support to the Iran-allied Houthis of Yemen in their war with a Saudi-led military alliance.

Iran is likely to rely partly on the clout Nasrallah, a figure who commands deep respect among Iran's allies across the region, the US official said. Nasrallah is seen as overseeing Kawtharani's efforts, according to a senior Shi'ite Iraqi leader.

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"I think ideologically, religiously, he's seen as a charismatic figure to many of the Iraqi Shia militias," the US official said, requesting anonymity because he was not authorized to speak on the record.

In two lengthy televised addresses, Nasrallah has paid homage to Soleimani and vowed to avenge his death.

He has also declared it a goal of Hezbollah and its allies to eject US forces from the region once and for all . US forces have been in Iraq since 2014 as part of a coalition fighting against Islamic State.

If the Iraqi militias have their way, sources close to them say, these troops will be the first to depart.



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Kuwait summons Iran envoy over Soleimani killing claim
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