

Pompeo visits Morocco in first since Trump election

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RABAT: Top US diplomat Mike Pompeo visited Morocco on Thursday, the highest-ranking American official to travel there since the election of President Donald Trump.

Pompeo met his Moroccan counterpart Nasser Bourita to discuss the "threat" posed by Iran's attempts to "broaden its regional influence," as well as the conflicts in Libya and unrest across the Sahel region, Bourita said in a statement.

The State Department has called Morocco an "essential partner" in Washington's broader diplomatic strategy, which includes normalization of ties between Arab countries and Israel.

The visit followed Israeli media reports that the country's officials were hoping for a "breakthrough" in normalizing ties with the North African country in the coming days.

Neither Pompeo nor Moroccan officials made any public mention of such efforts during his visit.

Egypt and Jordan remain the only Arab countries to have peace treaties and formal diplomatic ties with Israel.

"We have a great relationship between our two countries," Pompeo said, as he began his meetings in Rabat. "We make our people safer in each of our two countries."

The trip comes after Pompeo announced last month that the United States no longer considered Jewish settlements in the West Bank to be illegal.

The decision broke with decades of international consensus that the settlements are illegal and a major barrier to peace with the Palestinians.

The king of Morocco last month called for an end to "the policy of colonization in the occupied Palestinian territories" and reiterated his support for a two-state solution.

On Wednesday, Pompeo met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Portugal in talks dominated by policy on their arch-enemy Iran.

Pompeo said they "discussed efforts to counter Iran's destabilising influence in the region, the importance of economic cooperation with regional partners and other issues related to Israel's security."

The US Secretary of State's program was to include an audience with King Mohammed VI, but eventually the meeting was dropped, apparently due to Pompeo's extended stay in Lisbon.

He did however meet Moroccan Interior Minister Abdellatif Hammouchi to discuss counter-terrorism efforts, before leaving for Washington on Thursday evening.





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[Mike Pompeo](#)

[Mortars hit Iraq's Balad air base](#)

Thu, 2019-12-05 22:45

BAGHDAD: Two mortars landed inside Iraq's Balad air base on Thursday, two Iraqi military sources said.

No casualties have been reported in the mortar attack against the air base, said the sources.

Balad base hosts US forces and contractors and is located about 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Baghdad.

On Tuesday, five rockets landed on Ain Al-Asad air base, which hosts US forces in Anbar province in western Iraq without causing any casualties.



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Pro-paramilitary demonstrators flood Iraqi protest campIran using protest chaos to stockpile ballistic missiles in Iraq

Jordan government to raise public sector wages next year

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AMMAN: Jordan agreed on Thursday to public sector wage rises, a move that will increase government spending at a time of rising public debt but is crucial to stave off social instability, officials said.

Prime Minister Omar Al-Razzaz said the government took the decision, which covers 700,000 state employees including army personnel and civilian and military retirees, even though the country's finances were stretched.

"The economic situation and the exceptional circumstances that Jordan is going through in the region necessitates improving living conditions," Razzaz told an audience of officials and prominent figures.

The government, which has said it will not resort to new taxes, is mindful of protests in neighboring countries, including Lebanon and Iraq, in the past month over eroding living standards and corruption.

Tax rises pushed by the IMF last year sparked some of the biggest demonstrations in years and were also blamed by economists and politicians for a contraction in business activity.

The last significant public sector pay rises in 2010 and 2011 were part of billions of dollars in extra social spending to curb protests inspired by regional uprisings.

The public sector has over the last two decades expanded rapidly as successive governments sought to appease citizens with state jobs to maintain stability.

The runaway spending contributed to a soaring \$40 billion public debt, equivalent to 94% of gross domestic product which Jordan has been struggling to rein in under a three-year IMF program that ended this year.

The latest wage increase, which starts next year, will give state workers from bureaucrats to drivers pay increases ranging from 15 to 20 percent along with other substantial rises to army pensioners and civil servants.

They will add at least half a billion dinars (\$700 million) to salaries and pensions that already consume the bulk of state expenditure in the 9.8 billion dinars (\$14 billion) 2020 draft budget.

The spectre of bigger spending has already alarmed the IMF mission that came in November and will return in January to hold talks over a reform program, officials say.

Jordan wants the new program to focus on raising growth that has been stagnant at around 2 percent in the last decade and reduce record unemployment, which has risen sharply in the last two years to 19 percent, they added.

Jordan would resist any push by the IMF to adopt more austerity measures that

risked increasing stability and civil unrest, officials say. The government hopes higher revenues in revived economic activity in a country that has been hit by regional turmoil would help offset the wage bill hikes.

“We hope it will push growth and raise revenues and move the wheels of the economy,” Finance Minister Mohammad Al Ississ said.



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Amman comes to a standstill as teachers demand 50% pay rise Heavy rainfall and flooding sparks chaos in Amman

[EU in talks with Turkey as tensions mount over maritime deal with Libya](#)

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By SUZAN FRASER | AP

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Thu, 2019-12-05 17:40

ANKARA: The EU's top foreign representative on Thursday held talks with his Turkish counterpart as tensions continued to mount over a controversial deal on maritime boundaries signed between Turkey and Libya.

Josep Borrell, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, met with Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu in the Slovakian capital Bratislava to discuss the agreement which aims to delimit maritime zones in the eastern Mediterranean.

The memorandum of understanding (MoU) inked between Ankara and Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), has further deepened a regional dispute over Turkey's energy exploration plans for the waters.

The deal now has to be approved by the Turkish and Libyan parliaments for drilling operations to begin. According to a leaked report on Wednesday, the MoU covers a continental shelf reaching 18.6 nautical miles from the Turkish coast, referred to by Ankara as "Blue Motherland."

The Turkish government has claimed its actions are based on international law, but Greece, Cyprus and Egypt have dismissed the deal as "illegal" as it ignores the presence of the Greek island of Crete between the Turkish and Libyan coasts.

However, Turkey has said that islands situated on the opposite side of the median line between the two mainlands, did not possess any right to establish their own maritime jurisdiction areas.

Commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Khalifa Haftar, whose forces have been in conflict with the GNA in Tripoli, on Wednesday also strongly condemned the maritime deal and called on the UN Security Council to intervene.

He described the GNA as "brain dead" and argued that it had no authority to sign such agreements.

In the meantime, Brussels, which may proceed with some punitive measures in response to any "unauthorized" drilling, is trying to use diplomatic channels to resolve the situation.

But the day before Borrell's meeting with Cavusoglu, Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez resolutely announced Ankara's plans to launch oil and gas exploration in the region soon.

Turkey is not a signatory to the 1982 UN convention regulating maritime boundaries (UNCLOS).

Unal Cevikoz, a former Turkish ambassador and currently serving as deputy for the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), said: "If Turkey could have agreed with Egypt and Israel in the past over the delimitation of

maritime jurisdiction areas, it would be possible to prevent now any challenges related to the energy resources of the eastern Mediterranean.

“Ankara hasn’t nominated yet any ambassador to Egypt, Syria and Israel, which are countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean, and this deal pushed Turkey into a conflict zone where two governments in Libya clash with each other, rendering Ankara a party of this war,” he said in a statement.

Samuel Ramani, a geopolitical analyst and doctoral candidate at the University of Oxford, in England, said: “Turkey, by moving ahead with the deal on the Mediterranean Sea with the GNA, unambiguously inserts itself as an important player in the Libyan conflict.

“Turkey was widely believed to be supporting the GNA prior to Haftar’s campaign to capture Tripoli, and has been linked with arms transfers to the GNA, but this diplomatic deal reinforces its alignment with Libya’s GNA government,” he told Arab News.

Ramani added that the timing of Turkey’s actions was interesting, as Haftar was coming under growing pressure from the US and other members of the international community to abandon his military ambitions, which increased the GNA’s short-term security as a fighting force.

“So, Turkey is stepping up its role to increase its long-term influence over the GNA and compete for reconstruction contracts,” he said.

For some experts, Turkey’s backdown on its threat to block NATO plans for the Baltics at its London summit, was aimed at giving Ankara the upper hand in future negotiations on its other plans, including those in the eastern Mediterranean.

“Turkey definitely viewed the NATO summit as a victory for its foreign policy, and its decision to lift the blockade on eastern European aid illustrated these sentiments,” Ramani said.

Meanwhile, Cyprus is set to launch legal action at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague against Turkey’s exploratory gas drilling in waters where the Greek Cypriots claim exclusive economic rights.

According to Ramani, Turkey will try and channel the EU’s potential punitive measures toward Greek Cypriot drillers, while Cyprus’ ICJ case blames Turkey.

Ramani added: “If the ICJ rules in Cyprus’ favor, then sanctions are a possibility, but for now, it will likely remain a threat from the EU rather than a geopolitical reality.”



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Turkey's NATO membership 'unraveling' as leaders meet in London
Turkey rejects criticism of secretive Libya maritime deal

[Iran using protest chaos to stockpile ballistic missiles in Iraq](#)

Thu, 2019-12-05 19:29

LONDON: Iran is stockpiling short-range ballistic missiles in Iraq amid the chaos of vast anti-government protests there, US media reported.

The move is part of Tehran's strategy to spread its attack capabilities into different parts of the Middle East and threaten rivals such as Saudi Arabia and US forces based in the region.

Iran is using Iraqi Shiite militias that it funds and trains to help transport and store the missiles, American security officials told the New York Times.

The militias have seized control of several roads and bridges amid the protests that erupted last month, making it easier for Iran to move the weapons into the country, the officials said.

The report did not say how many missiles had been moved or what type they are, but Iran's short-range usually refers to missiles that have a maximum range of more than 900 kilometers.

This would put cities like Riyadh and Jerusalem within range of areas near Baghdad.

The report comes after Iran was blamed for a complex cruise missile and drone attack against major Saudi oil facilities in September. The Kingdom is still investigating the raid but said the weapons hit Abqaiq oil processing plant and an oil field from a northerly direction.

However, Washington ruled out that they could have been launched from Iraq after the government in Baghdad denied its territory had been used to stage the attacks.

Reports emerged last year that Iran had started deploying missiles into Iraq and Israel carried out airstrikes over the summer against the systems.

The deployment of more weapons to Iraq will deeply concern the US and its Arab allies. The tactic fits with Iran's recent operations in which it is accused of attempting to create enough doubt over who and where they were launched from to avoid retaliation while still trying to cause maximum disruption.

Iran was blamed for attacks on tankers earlier in the year both off the UAE coast and in the Strait of Hormuz that caused global concern over the security of major shipping routes in the region.

Elissa Slotkin, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, told the New York Times that Iran was taking advantage of the widespread protests in southern Iraq.

"People are not paying enough attention to the fact that ballistic missiles in the last year have been placed in Iraq by Iran with the ability to project violence on the region," she said.

On Wednesday, a senior Pentagon official said there were indications that Iran could potentially carry out "aggressive" actions in the future, without giving more details.

The US has deployed 14,000 additional troops to the Gulf since the spring to confront the threat from Iran.



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