

# Turkey frees US scientist but tensions remain

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WASHING: Turkey on Wednesday released a NASA scientist with dual US-Turkish citizenship whose nearly three-year detention had soured relations, but the NATO allies remained divided over issues including Ankara's purchase of a Russian missile system.

Serkan Golge, a naturalized US citizen working for the US space agency in Houston, was arrested in July 2016 on a visit back to Turkey in the aftermath of a failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Turkish authorities charged Golge with ties to self-exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Erdogan accused of orchestrating the mutiny. Golge was sentenced in 2018 to seven and a half years in prison despite US State Department protests that there was no credible evidence.

His wife, Kubra Golge, expressed joy at his release but said that he remained banned from traveling outside Turkey.

"We are happy but he still rejects the charges against him," she told AFP by email. "Hope we can come back soon to the US."

State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said that the United States would press for Golge to be able to return to the United States "as soon as possible."

"We want to commend them for doing the right thing today by releasing him," Ortagus told reporters. "We think it's welcome news."

Ortagus said that the United States was still seeking the release of detained local employees of US diplomatic missions in Turkey.

Golge was freed shortly after Erdogan spoke by telephone with US President Donald Trump, although an official summary by Turkey did not mention discussion of the Golge case.

Turkey in October also released an American pastor caught up in the crackdown, Andrew Brunson. His case had become a cause celebre among the conservative Christian base of Trump, who pressed Turkey through tariffs that sent the lira currency into a tailspin.

Golge's case had triggered growing anger in the United States. A bipartisan group of senators recently introduced a bill seeking sanctions on Turkish officials involved in the detention of US citizens, saying that Ankara's actions did not befit a NATO ally.

But Turkey still is at risk of US sanctions over its purchase of Russia's S-400 missile defense system. Washington is pressing Ankara to instead buy the US Patriot equivalent.

Erdogan has said the S-400 purchase was a "done deal" but in the phone call with Trump reiterated an offer to form a joint working group on the decision, according to the Turkish president's office.

The State Department voiced appreciation for Turkey as an ally but reiterated

concerns about the deal, which US officials say could help Russia hone its system to target US hardware used by NATO.

"We're willing to engage with the Turkish government but our position remains the same that Turkey will face very real and very negative consequences if it completes the delivery of the S-400," Ortagus said.

The United States has already suspended Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter jet program, in which Turkey had invested \$1 billion.

Washington and Ankara have also clashed over Syria, with Trump promising to pull out all 2,000 US troops from the war-battered nation following a December phone conversation with Erdogan.

Trump has since slowed down the withdrawal partly because his aides fear that Turkey will use the absence of US troops to strike Syrian Kurdish fighters.

The forces helped defeat extremists from the Daesh group, but Ankara associates them with separatists at home.



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# At least five dead in blasts in Iraq's Kirkuk

Thu, 2019-05-30 22:41

KIRKUK: At least five people were killed and 18 injured in a series of explosions in the Iraqi oil city of Kirkuk, medical sources in the city's general hospital told Reuters on Thursday.

At least six improvised explosive devices went off in the northern city and two more were defused by security forces, the Iraqi military said in a statement. It gave a lower death toll of three and said 16 were injured. The explosion sites included two malls, an ice cream shop and a butcher's shop, local media reported.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility but Daesh militants are active in the area. Iraq declared victory over the group, which once held large swathes of the country, in December 2017.

But Daesh has switched to hit-and-run attacks aimed at undermining the Baghdad government.

Its fighters have regrouped in the Hamrin mountain range in the northeast, which extends from Diyala province, on the border with Iran, crossing northern Salahuddin province and southern Kirkuk.



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# **US stands firm against Iran, it will strike if attacked: Brian Hook**

Thu, 2019-05-30 20:37

DUBAI: Iran needs to show more interest in talks than threats, a senior advisor to the US Secretary of State has said, adding that the US will respond with “military might” if its interests were attacked.

Brian Hook, the US Special Representative for Iran and Senior Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State, said a number of “military assets” had already been repositioned in response to intelligence that Iran was planning imminent attacks against American interests.

“We have made it clear that we will respond with military force if American interests are attacked by Iran,” Hook said at a press briefing on Thursday.

He said the US was awaiting the results of the investigations into the recent attacks on UAE, Saudi and Norwegian tankers in the region and said a “proper response” would then be discussed.

“We have been consistent in our messaging – Iran should show more of an interest in talks than threats and we have seen on an almost daily basis from the Iranian regime that they will not talk with the United States.”

“Iran faces a choice – they have to decide whether they want to be a normal country or a revolutionary cause,” he warned.

Hook said President Trump was open to negotiations, but he added that the US “maximum pressure campaign” was working “by nearly every measure.”

“The Iranian regime and its proxies are weaker today than when the (US) president took office over two years ago,” he explained.

Already, he said, Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah had made a public call for support – “piggy banks have been placed in grocery stores in Lebanon to help raise funds,” while Hamas has enacted austerity plans to deal with a lack of funds from Iran.

He said Iran’s Shiite militia groups would have to “find new sources of revenue.”

And he said that the Assad regime today faced a fuel shortage crisis because

the US had cut off the 1–3 million barrels per month that Iran had previously supplied.

Even Iran's military spending has been cut, he said, adding that it peaked during the nuclear deal.

"Since we exited the deal, Iran's military spending for the budget that they released in March was cut by 28 percent."

He said Iran was in recession and once the US oil sanctions take full effect, with a policy of zero imports for Iranian crude oil – the sanctions will deny the Iranian regime \$50 billion in revenue – that's 40 percent of Iran's annual budget.

Trump also said on Thursday that Iran's economy is suffering from US sanctions and that the country is becoming a "weakened nation."



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## Morocco says it nabbed fugitive Italian mobster

Author:

Thu, 2019-05-30 18:50

RABAT: An Italian mafia fugitive wanted for drug trafficking, murder, extortion and other alleged crimes has been arrested in Morocco, authorities in the North African country said Thursday.

Raffaele Vallefucio, 55, is accused of heading a cell within the Polverino clan of the ruthless Naples-based Camorra organized crime group, the General Directorate of National Security said in a statement.

He was detained in Tangiers on Wednesday under an Italian arrest warrant, with help from Interpol, it said.

Another Italian accused of links to the Camorra, 44-year-old Antonio Prinno, was arrested in late March in Marrakesh and is being detained pending extradition, a police source said.

The Camorra is one of Italy's three main mafia groups, along with Sicily's Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta, based mainly in the Calabria region.

Morocco is one of the world's top producers and exporters of hashish, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.



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Trial for murder of Scandinavian hikers to open in Morocco

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## People smuggling venture returned to Sri Lanka

Twenty potential illegal immigrants (PII) have been returned to Sri Lanka from a people smuggling venture targeting Australia.