

Under crippling sanctions, Iranian leaders discuss economic ties with Iraqi president

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1542439555487239200

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BAGHDAD: The Iraqi president visited Iran on Saturday as Tehran seeks to shore up ties with its closest economic partners after crushing new sanctions were reimposed by the US.

Iran is struggling to cope with the impact of two waves of sanctions this year introduced after Donald Trump pulled America out of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May.

The second phase of sanctions earlier this month targeted the energy sector, banks and shipping and placed Iraq in an awkward position. Baghdad relies heavily on imports from Iran and would face punishment if it breached the restrictions.

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President Barham Salih met his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He spoke of the importance of economic relations between the two countries as Iraq rebuilds after the war against Daesh.

“We are carrying a clear and open message about the importance of social and economic relations with Iran, as we have close ties with the Iranian people,” Salih said in Tehran. “Iraq today is looking to restore its reconstruction and stability, and this requires internal and external political initiatives and requires a stable regional environment.”

Salih also spoke about a new regional system, in which Iraq would have a pivotal role, “to overcome the current differences and focus on the bilateral interests.”

“Iraq will continue its role as an arena to meet the interests of the peoples of the region, not as a battlefield for the conflicted wills,” he said.

Iraq has been a battleground between the US and Iran since the fall of Saddam

Hussein in 2003.

Since elections in May, political factions divided roughly into pro and anti Iran camps, have been locked in a bitter struggle for control of a new government.

Many in Iraq feel Iran has too heavy a hand in the country, where it controls powerful Shiite armed factions.

The two sides also discussed “the environmental problems” related to the Shatt Al-Arab waterway that divides the countries in the south, establishing joint industrial areas on the border, and the possibility of a railway link between the two countries.

They also discussed increasing trade between Iraq and Iran, setting up a joint security committees and how to help the visa process for travel between them.

Rouhani said the two countries aimed to boost trade from \$12 billion to \$20 billion.

“We held talks on trade in electricity, gas, petroleum products,” Rouhani said.

Iran is hoping to maintain exports to Iraq despite the latest sanctions, which took effect on Nov. 5. The country has seen its oil exports plunge and its currency lose more than half its value.

The US has granted Iraq a 45-day waiver to allow it to continue to purchase gas and electricity from Iran for use in its power stations.

Iraq has suffered extensive electricity outages this year, sparking widespread protests in the south. Iraqi officials say they need more time to find an alternative source, Reuters reported.

Salih visits Saudi Arabia on Sunday as part of a regional tour that included Jordan, the UAE and Kuwait. Relations between the Kingdom and Iraq improved in 2017 as the two countries held a series of high-level meetings.

The sanctions have increased pressure on Iraq’s new Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi. He still has not managed to get a number of key ministerial positions approved by parliament as the main rival factions jostle for influence.

Meanwhile, Iranian workers launched further industrial action as the country struggles under the weight of its economic woes.

Workers at Iran’s oldest sugar cane company went on strike on Saturday over unpaid wages, the Iranian ILNA news agency reported.

ILNA published a photo of a rally by workers from the Haft Tapeh company in Shush, south-western Iran, showing women marching with their children – one holding a sign saying: “We are hungry.”



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Iraq's president to visit Saudi Arabia as part of regional tour
Iraq restarts small Kirkuk oil exports after a year of suspension

[**Russia: Extremist alliance will not withdraw from Idlib zone**](#)

Sat, 2018-11-17 05:35

ANKARA: Turkey has failed to persuade the rebel alliance Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) to withdraw from a demilitarized zone in Syria's Idlib province that was agreed by Ankara and Moscow in September, Russia's Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.

"Sporadic fighting continued to be recorded in places with a residual terrorist presence, primarily in Idlib... Militants continued shelling western Aleppo," said ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

On Thursday, Turkish and Russian officials met in Ankara ahead of Russian

President Vladimir Putin's visit to Istanbul on Nov. 19.

Timur Akhmetov, a researcher at the Russian International Affairs Council, said although there are serious problems with implementation of the Idlib agreement, Russian officials stressed that the process requires time and effort.

"Russia doesn't want to push Turkey because there's a much more important thing: Constitutional dialogue between the Syrian opposition and government, where Turkish-Russian dialogue plays a decisive role," he told Arab News.

"(Turkish President Recep Tayyip) Erdogan publicly undertook obligations to clear the (Idlib) zone from terrorists," Akhmetov said.

"Ankara is also having a hard time with the US regarding the Syrian Kurds. I think Russia will find ways to exploit this situation."

Turkey has designated HTS, which is led by the former Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham (JFS), a terrorist organization.

Under the Turkish-Russian deal, rebel groups, including HTS, were to withdraw from the demilitarized zone by mid-October.

Ankara has repeatedly indicated its readiness to use force against radical groups if they refuse to withdraw.

Turkey has reinforced its military presence in Idlib with armored vehicles and equipment. It has 12 military posts in the province.

Enes Ayasli, a research assistant and Middle East expert at Sakarya University in Turkey, said the most obvious setback of the Idlib deal is that moderate rebel groups in the province now back HTS if there is a clash between it and Syrian regime forces.

"Their focus is now on repelling regime forces even if it means violating the deal," he told Arab News.

"Turkey in this sense seems to have failed to separate moderate groups completely from extremists."

An intensification of fighting between the regime and extremists may cause the deal to collapse completely, Ayasli said.

Meanwhile, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported an increased rate of violations of the Idlib demilitarized zone.



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Russian army says 270,000 Syrian refugees have returned home Assad calls on Syria's Druze minority to do military service

[Italy's Libya talks lay bare deep divisions](#)

Author:

Fri, 2018-11-16 23:09

TRIPOLI: Italy's Libya talks this week laid bare deep divisions between the key power brokers, threatening attempts to resolve the country's ongoing crisis, analysts say.

Two days of meetings in the Sicilian capital Palermo saw some delegates refuse to sit side by side, while a meeting held on the sidelines sparked a diplomatic spat.

"The dynamics between the four Libyan delegations attending the Palermo

conference regrettably show that the rifts are still very deep,” said Claudia Gazzini, a Libya analyst at International Crisis Group.

Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar showed up, only to snub the main conference and organize separate talks with international leaders.

Such a move was “a slap in the face to the Libyan politicians at the conference,” said Gazzini.

Haftar, whose self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) holds much of eastern Libya, held a meeting with representatives of Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, France and Russia.

One of his main rivals, UN-backed Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj, also attended the “informal talks,” but Qatar and Turkey were not invited.

Their exclusion prompted Ankara to pull out of the main conference in protest.

LNA spokesman Ahmed Al-Mesmari later accused Turkey and Qatar of traveling to Palermo “to protect the interests of the terrorist groups which they are supporting in Libya.”

Fragility

Khaled Saleh El-Kuafi, a professor at the University of Benghazi, said the outcome “illustrated the extent of the crisis, the divisions in Libya and the fragility of the situation.”

Haftar “succeeded in being the star of the conference” by refusing to meet some of his rivals and sidelining Turkey and Qatar,” he added.

The Palermo talks followed a Paris meeting at which Libyan leaders agreed to prepare for elections this December. Such a timeline was widely viewed as unrealistic, however, and preparations for polls have now been pushed back to 2019.

For Khaled Al-Montasser, a professor at the University of Tripoli, international meetings cannot succeed “while the international parties are putting the Libyans under pressure and while they put forward solutions to the crisis which suit themselves and them alone.”

It should be up to the Libyans, he said, to “agree on the subjects that they must discuss.”

But, as Montasser noted, the Libyan leaders themselves are “not ready to accept each other and to tolerate differences of opinion.”

Just as in May, the top Libyan invitees to Palermo were Haftar, Al-Sarraj, who heads the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, the eastern parliament’s speaker Aguila Salah and Khaled Al-Mechri, speaker of a Tripoli-based upper chamber.

But the Italy talks were not really focused on improving relations between the rivals, according to Libyan analyst Emad Badi.

It was instead “an attempt by Italy to both react to the French initiative and to reposition itself as a power broker,” he said.

Despite the conference being viewed as a failure by numerous analysts, some have underlined the importance of meetings organized by the UN a few hours before the formal talks opened.

Those discussions focused on economic and security issues in Libya, where residents have seen their currency’s value plummet and endured years of violence.

Weeks of clashes in September between rival militias in the capital Tripoli killed at least 117 people and wounded more than 400, prompting Al-Sarraj’s government to introduce reforms.

The UN’s Libya envoy, Ghassan Salame, this week welcomed the participants’ backing for the new measures and their “unanimous support” for a national conference early next year.

The 2019 talks are intended to give Libyans a chance to spell out their vision for the future, with elections slated for a few months later.

However, “numerous Libyans are still not certain of the format and aims of that conference,” said Crisis Group’s Gazzini.



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Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

1542395863492303300

Fri, 2018-11-16 22:17

JEDDAH: Iraq's President Barham Salih will visit Saudi Arabia as part of a regional tour that will also include a visit to Iran on Saturday.

The Iraqi president visited Jordan on Thursday where he met King Abdullah II of Jordan. The two leaders discussed projects in the fields of energy, the extension of an oil pipeline between the two countries, and supplying electricity to Iraq.

"The governments of Iraq and Jordan will promote economic cooperation: the joint industrial city, energy cooperation, the oil pipeline from Basra to Aqaba," Salih tweeted.

Salih also visited the UAE on Monday and Kuwait on Sunday.

On Saturday the Kurdish president will meet Hassan Rouhani in Tehran and a number of Iranian leaders and officials to discuss bilateral relations, ways to increase cooperation, and developments in the region, the Iraq state news agency said.

The veteran politician was elected last month as Iraq attempted to form a government after months of deadlock since elections in May.

His meetings in Iran will be dominated by a number of pressing political, economic and security issues.

The election left Iraq's main political forces divided into pro and anti Iran factions. Many in Iraq have become critical of Iran's heavy-handed influence in the country and its funding of powerful armed factions.

Because of its economic ties with Iran, Iraq has also been put in a difficult position by fresh US sanctions against Tehran.

Last week, the US said Iraq could continue to import natural gas and energy supplies from Iran for a period of 45 days, after reimposing sanctions on Tehran's oil sector.

Iraq's central bank said in August that Baghdad would ask Washington for exemptions from some of the sanctions.





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[Russian army says 270,000 Syrian refugees have returned home](#)

Author:

AP

ID:

1542390827031930200

Sat, 2018-11-17 (All day)

MOSCOW: The Russian military said nearly 270,000 Syrian refugees have returned home in recent months, a fraction of the estimated 5.6 million Syrians who have fanned out across the world fleeing the seven-year conflict. Moscow and the government in Damascus have been encouraging refugees to

repatriate, arguing that the violence has subsided. Russia launched military operations to help Syrian President Bashar Assad in 2015, changing the tide of the war in his favor.

Western governments have, however, argued that it's too early to encourage return. Rights groups and the UN fear refugees would face persecution returning to government-controlled areas in the absence of a comprehensive political agreement.

Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev of the Russian Defense Ministry told reporters Friday that nearly 6,000 people have returned to Syria in the last week alone, according to data collected by Russia.

He said they are seeing large waves of refugees returning home.

The conflict has caused nearly half of Syria's population to be displaced, with an estimated 6 million internally displaced and 5.6 million fleeing to neighboring countries and Europe, and registering with the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Russia has negotiated local cease-fires that have greatly reduced the fighting, but the causes of the conflict have not been addressed. The Syrian government has regained control of nearly 60 percent of Syrian territory. But armed opposition, some backed by Turkey, and Daesh militants remain holed up in areas in the north and south of the country.

The violence has not completely stopped.

On Friday, the UN Children agency UNICEF said the first nine months of 2018 saw the highest number of children killed since the conflict began in 2011, putting it at 870 till September.

"These are only verified cases, with actual numbers likely to be much higher," UNICEF said in a statement Friday.

The agency said it is alarmed by recent reports of the killing of up to 30 children in the last IS-held pocket in eastern Syria where the U.S-led coalition and its local allies, the Syrian Democratic Forces, have been waging an offensive for over two months.

UNICEF didn't say how the children were killed, but reports by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights – the Britain-based group monitoring the war – said more than 30 children were killed last weekend in coalition airstrikes on Shafaa village held by the extremists. The coalition says it checks reports of civilian casualties, describing its airstrikes mostly as targeting IS installations or posts.



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