

Will Turkey continue its policy of reconciliation in the region next year?

Fri, 2021-12-31 19:10

ANKARA: Turkey made significant efforts in 2021 to normalize its relations with Armenia, Egypt, the Gulf, and Israel after years of disagreements.

The big question now is whether Ankara's efforts to thaw the ice with these countries by de-escalating regional conflicts will continue with the same vigor in 2022.

On Thursday, Armenia announced its embargo on goods from Turkey would be lifted on January 1 and that Yerevan-Istanbul charter flights would soon begin again after decades of closed borders.

Two weeks ago, Turkey appointed its former ambassador to the US Serdar Kilic as its special envoy to conduct normalization talks with Armenia. This gesture was followed by Armenia appointing Ruben Rubinyan – who studied in Turkey through a scholarship from a Turkish NGO – as its special representative for dialogue. Moscow will host the first meeting between the two envoys in January.

“Turkey has been recalibrating its foreign policy in the eastern Mediterranean and the MENA region,” Prof. Michaël Tanchum, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington and an associate senior policy fellow in the Africa program at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told Arab News. According to Tanchum, Turkey's focus in the Eastern Mediterranean has been on Egypt and to a lesser extent Israel.

Regarding Egypt, Turkey this year asked all Istanbul-based Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media channels to soften their criticism of the Egyptian government. The two countries held talks in September, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently announced that Ankara was considering sending ambassadors back to Egypt and Israel.

During his recent meeting with representatives from the Jewish diaspora, Erdogan underlined that Turkey-Israel ties are vital for the stability and security of the region.

“Both (Egypt and Israel) have become key energy, economic, and military partners to Greece and Cyprus following the deterioration in their respective relations with Turkey in the early part of the previous decade,” Tanchum said. “Similarly, Ankara has been taken aback by Greece's developing defense ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel under the Abraham Accords has solidified this alignment of Middle Eastern states with Greece and Cyprus.”

Tanchum thinks that, for Egypt, the most immediate stumbling block – despite Ankara’s diplomatic outreach – is Turkey’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

“Beyond this, the two countries are increasingly rivals for influence across Africa. The fact that Egypt was not invited to Turkey’s recent Africa summit shows the geopolitical limitations. Nonetheless, commercial relations between the two nations will likely increase, barring any major incident. The same is true for Israel-Turkey relations,” he said.

Although Turkey and several regional actors backed different sides in the Libyan conflict, Ankara now supports Libya’s political transition towards elections.

Turkish Airlines is also expected to relaunch its flights to Benghazi once technical work and security precautions have been completed.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu recently noted that Turkey does not differentiate between the west and east of Libya, and that Ankara was prepared to meet with both military strongman Gen. Khalifa Haftar and the speaker of the Tobruk-based parliament, Aquila Saleh.

Turkey’s moves towards reconciliation with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel as part of its efforts to break its regional isolation have escalated in recent months.

The UAE committed to investing \$10 billion in Turkey following the visit of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Zayed to Ankara on November 24 – offering a vital boost for the Turkish economy. The Turkish Central Bank is expected to sign deals with its counterpart in the UAE soon and Erdogan is reportedly scheduled to visit the UAE in February.

“The rapprochement between Turkey and the UAE will likely continue, with expanding Emirati investment in Turkish companies. The Emirati fintech company Tpay’s acquisition of Turkey’s mobile banking and digital financial services firm Payguru is just one example of more investments likely to occur in 2022,” Tanchum said.

Meanwhile, Erdogan announced that Turkey will work to improve its ties with Saudi Arabia. The two countries’ foreign ministers met in May and committed to holding regular consultations. Experts anticipate further such commitments between Riyadh and Ankara in the new year.

Of all its relationships that Turkey sought to improve in 2021, Tanchum sees Armenia as the wild card.

“Because of the outcome of the Karabakh war, there is a genuine moment of opportunity for Turkish-Armenian reconciliation,” he said. “A grand diplomatic gesture on Turkey’s part that closes a chapter on an old historical wound could reset the tone of Turkish foreign policy with positive spillover effects for Turkey’s relations with its Eastern Mediterranean neighbors as well as with the European Union.”

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish program at the Washington Institute, agrees that 2021 has been a year of significant shifts in Turkey's foreign policy.

"By re-establishing friendships and forging new partnerships, Ankara has shown that it realizes it cannot stand alone and ignore everybody else in regional and global politics. Therefore, it chose to reset its ties with former rivals," he told Arab News.

Cagaptay expects Turkey's next target for normalization of relations will be the US, but considering Ankara's current power-sharing agreements with Russia in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus, that process could be trickier and take longer.

"Therefore, I think it's not a complete pivot (in foreign policy), but the Middle East part of it is an attempt, at least," he said.

Regarding Turkey's relations with Egypt, Cagaptay notes that it took Turkey nearly eight years to recognize that its singular support of the Muslim Brotherhood failed to pay off.

"No one could have anticipated the speed of the Brotherhood's fall from power. So I don't blame Erdogan for that, but he should have been in touch with other political actors and I think that's where the policy is ill-conceived," he said. "There is now recognition of this, and 2022 is a pivotal year."



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Life in Turkey takes toll on female Afghan MPs who fled Taliban rule
Turkey lobbies Taliban in bid to operate five Afghan airports

[France says Iran's space launch hits nuclear talks as they were showing progress](#)

Fri, 2021-12-31 17:11

PARIS: France on Friday condemned Iran's satellite rocket launch and said it was "all the more regrettable" as nuclear talks with world powers were making progress, echoing concerns expressed by the United States and Germany.

Iran said on Thursday it had used a satellite launch rocket to send three research devices into space, as indirect US-Iran talks take place in Austria to try to salvage a 2015 nuclear deal.

The satellite launch was in breach of UN Security Council resolutions, France's foreign ministry said.

"These activities are all the more regrettable as they come at a time when we are making progress in the nuclear negotiations in Vienna," the French foreign ministry said.

"We call on Iran not to launch further ballistic missiles designed to be capable of carrying nuclear weapons, including space launchers."

Iranian state TV showed footage on Thursday of what it said was the firing of the launch vehicle from the Imam Khomeini Space Center in northern Iran at dawn.

The US State Department said on Thursday Washington was aware of reports on the launch, adding such launches defy a UN Security Council resolution enshrining the 2015 nuclear deal.

A German diplomat said such launches could be used to test technology for ballistic missiles which in principle could be used to deliver nuclear weapons.

Tehran denies its space launch activity is a cover for ballistic missile development.

The 2015 deal extended the time Iran would need to obtain enough fissile material for a nuclear bomb – if it chose to – to at least a year from about two to three months, in return for a lifting of sanctions.

The latest indirect talks between Iran and the US on the 2015 deal resumed on Monday. On Tuesday, Washington expressed caution over upbeat comments by Iran and Russia about the talks, saying it was too soon to say if Tehran had returned to the negotiations with a constructive approach.



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Iran announces new space launch amid nuclear talksIran nuclear talks 'now urgent': European and US negotiators

[7 European countries bar Turkish passengers as omicron surges](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-30 23:23

ANKARA: Seven European nations, including the Netherlands, Italy and Spain,

have barred Turkish passengers from entering their countries as the omicron variant spreads, according to travel guidance by Turkey's SHGM civil aviation authority.

Daily coronavirus cases in Turkey have reached their highest level since April this week, surging to nearly 37,000, but the number is still significantly below figures reported in parts of Europe.

The SHGM's COVID-19 travel guidance, last updated on Dec. 28, said the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Luxembourg, Croatia, Iceland and Switzerland would no longer accept Turkish passengers. It said Turkish passengers would need to show proof of vaccination when entering Portugal or Sweden.

"Entry cannot be made from our country," the SHGM list said for the seven European countries, without elaborating. The SHGM also updated travel restrictions for Iraq and Iran, saying passengers traveling to the two countries may be subject to 14-day quarantine upon entry, while other travelers would need a negative PCR test. It was not immediately clear when the new restrictions were put in place or how long they would be in effect.

The Netherlands announced a snap COVID-19 Christmas lockdown earlier this month, which will be reviewed on Jan. 14. Other countries have seen record number of coronavirus cases in recent weeks, working to balance restrictions while keeping economies running.

Turkey has said it was not considering new restrictions for the moment, instead urging citizens to ramp up personal measures and get vaccinated. Ankara launched a nationwide rollout of its domestic COVID-19 vaccine, Turkovac, on Thursday.



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Turkey to open \$45m hospital for Syrian refugees with help from EU

[Satellite images show smoldering wreckage at Syrian Latakia port](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-30 23:26

BEIRUT: Satellite images taken this week over the Syrian port of Latakia show the smoldering wreckage after a reported Israeli missile strike, hours after firefighters contained a massive blaze.

The raid launched from the Mediterranean Sea on Tuesday was among the biggest launched by Israel into Syria, igniting a fire in the container terminal that raged for hours and caused significant material damage in the vicinity.

It damaged a nearby hospital and offices, and also shattered windows of residential buildings and cars parked in the area near the port. The explosion could be heard miles away.

It was the second such attack on the facility this month.



Flames rise from burning containers at the scene of a missile attack at the

seaport of the coastal city of Latakia, Syria. (AP)

The Latakia seaport handles most of the imports to Syria, a country ravaged by a decade-old civil war and Western-imposed sanctions.

Another attack took place Dec. 7, when Syrian media reported Israeli warplanes hit the container terminal, also igniting a major fire.

Satellite photos obtained by The Associated Press from Planet Labs PBC on Thursday showed heavy smog over the container terminal on Wednesday, likely from the struck container still smoking. The images suggest it was a high precision strike that appeared to hit one container.

A Syrian military official said the Israeli missiles were fired from the sea, west of Latakia, hitting the terminal and igniting fires.

Maj. Mohannad Jafaar, head of the Latakia fire department, said 12 fire trucks worked for hours to contain the blaze.

He said the containers that were hit held spare auto parts and oil but there were no casualties.

The Israeli military, which rarely comments on individual attacks or discusses details of such operations, declined to comment on the reported strike.

Israel says it targets bases of Iran-allied militias, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah group, which has fighters in Syria. It says it attacks arms shipments believed to be bound for the militias.

Also on Thursday, Bahrain appointed its first ambassador to Damascus since it downgraded ties early in the conflict.

The appointment of Waheed Mubarak Sayyar, reported by Bahrain's state news agency BNA, is part of a diplomatic shift in the Middle East as a growing number of Arab countries revive ties with President Bashar Assad.

Gulf states downgraded or shut missions in Damascus after the Syrian regime used force against the 2011 protests that developed into war.

Bahrain has said its embassy, and the Syrian diplomatic mission in Manama, have remained operational.

Last month, the UAE, which reopened its mission to Damascus in late 2018, sent its foreign minister to Damascus where he met Assad. It has called for Syria to be readmitted to the Arab League.

Abu Dhabi began to re-engage with Damascus after decisive gains by pro-regime forces, hoping to increase Arab clout in Syria at the expense of non-Arab Turkey and Iran, which supports Assad.

Oman last year became the first Gulf state to reinstate an ambassador to Syria.



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Syria says fires extinguished at Latakia's port following Israeli 'aggression'
Two die of wounds from Israeli strike on Syria port

[As the crises in Lebanon continue into 2022 so does the suffering of its people](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-30 22:37

BEIRUT: As the people of Lebanon prepare to greet the arrival of a new year, they are exhausted from the escalation of the suffering they endured in 2021.

A year marked by additional crises affecting the health sector, the judiciary and the military is ending amid increasingly frosty relations between the country's political leaders.

Images of parents in tears because they are unable to buy medicine or milk

for their children, and scenes of long queues at gas stations were among the most graphic illustrations of the humiliations citizens have been subjected to.

The value of the minimum wage of 675,000 Lebanese pounds fell to just \$23 as the dollar exchange rate reached an unprecedented high of 29,000 pounds.

In the past 12 months, Lebanon has gone through crises described by the World Bank in June as “the most severe in the world.”

Monetary policies were blamed as the Lebanese Central Bank experienced a further sharp decline in foreign-currency reserves. It resorted to repeatedly printing more currency to secure the necessary liquidity, which fueled inflation.

In August, it stopped subsidizing imports of fuel, and then medicines. Workers now have to spend more than half of their salaries just to travel to work. The lives of many people are at risk because medicine is not available to buy or, if it is, they can no longer afford it.

Lebanon literally fell into darkness this year, as Electricite du Liban – the country’s main power company – was unable to provide minimum levels of electricity, and many people had to stop renting private generators as monthly costs soared.

The removal of state subsidies was not accompanied by any clear mechanism for protecting citizens from poverty, as a cash-card aid program for the poor and the middle class has yet to be approved.

The growing social instability was reflected in the security situation and rising crime rate in the country, with cases of theft increasing by 137 percent compared with 2020.

On Feb. 4, publisher and political activist Lokman Slim, a prominent critic of Hezbollah, was assassinated. He previously said he had received death threats from the group.

Meanwhile Hezbollah spared no effort to consolidate its control over the country, going so far as to threaten Judge Tarek Bitar, who is leading the judicial investigation into the Beirut Port explosion, accusing him of politicizing the investigation.

Despite Hezbollah’s challenges to the Lebanese government, and US sanctions, by importing fuel from Iran via Syria in September, it did not last long amid the ongoing crises.

A young man from an Arab clan in Khaldeh, south of Beirut, assassinated a Hezbollah official in August, and members of the same clan ambushed supporters of the party during the funeral of their colleague in Khaldeh, which led to the deaths of five people.

The height of the armed confrontation between Hezbollah and its opponents took place in Ain Al-Remmaneh in October, when a four-hour shootout among

fighters armed with machine guns and missiles took place. Seven people died in the clashes and dozens were injured. The Amal Movement and Hezbollah accused the Lebanese Forces party of attacking protesters, loyal to Amal and Hezbollah, that were heading to the Justice Palace to demand the dismissal of Judge Bitar.

Since he took over the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion, it has been suspended seven times by politicians accused of involvement in the circumstances that led to the blast, including former Prime Minister Hassan Diab.

Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned after he was unable to form a government of independent specialists to support a French aid initiative, reportedly because the process was obstructed by the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah.

Najib Mikati took over and, after 13 months of political stalemate, formed a new government in September. The same old political forces were represented, however, and within a month its work was halted by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement.

The crisis in the country peaked toward the end of the year when Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries cut diplomatic and economic ties with Lebanon in protest against offensive criticisms made by Information Minister George Kordahi about the war in Yemen.

The politician's belated resignation failed to improve the strained relations, as Saudi authorities said that "Hezbollah continues to destabilize Lebanon and exports drugs to the Kingdom."

As a result of the continuing economic crisis, and Lebanon's inability to pay its dues for the work of the International Tribunal for Lebanon, the tribunal was permanently suspended in July.

The country faces two important political events in 2022: The parliamentary elections on May 15, in which thousands of expatriates will be eligible to vote, and a presidential election in October.

A great challenge remains the implementation of the reforms demanded by the international community as a condition for aid to help Lebanon overcome its economic and social crises.

Lebanon has at least been promised an improvement in the quality and reliability of its electricity supply, thanks to Egypt and Jordan, in coming year. And Lebanese security services have promised to continue their fight against the smuggling of drugs through the country.

Meanwhile, the global pandemic continues to rage and, as the new year begins, many people in Lebanon will be awaiting the results of tests, amid violations of the precautionary measures to slow the spread of the virus.

The Lebanese people will be hoping that these are the only negative results they see during what they desperately need to be a better year ahead.



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