

Erdogan says Biden's Armenian genocide recognition 'destructive'

Mon, 2021-04-26 19:42

ANKARA: Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday denounced US President Joe Biden's recognition of the Armenian genocide as "groundless" and harmful to bilateral ties.

Erdogan had issued a carefully-worded statement moments before Biden made his landmark announcement on Saturday at a ceremony commemorating the tragic 1915-17 events.

But the Turkish president did not hold back his anger in a televised address that he also used to point out the US history of slavery and persecution of Native Americans.

"The US president has made comments that are groundless and unfair," Erdogan said.

"We believe that these comments were included in the declaration following pressure from radical Armenian groups and anti-Turkish circles. But this situation does not reduce the destructive impact of these comments."

The Armenians – supported by historians and scholars – say 1.5 million of their people died in a genocide committed under the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

Ankara accepts that both Armenians and Turks died in huge numbers as Ottoman forces fought tsarist Russia.

But Turkey vehemently denies a deliberate policy of genocide and notes that the term had not been legally defined at the time.

Biden tried to temper the inevitable Turkish anger by calling Erdogan for the first time since taking office in January.

The two leaders agreed in Friday's phone call to meet on the sidelines of a NATO summit in June.

But Erdogan said on Monday that Biden needed "to look in the mirror" when calling the century-old events a genocide.

"We can also talk about what happened to Native Americans, Blacks and in Vietnam," Erdogan said.

Turkey on Saturday summoned the US ambassador to complain that Biden's decision had opened "a wound in relations that is difficult to repair."

Washington had been bracing for a furious Turkish response.

The United States closed its Ankara embassy and the consulate in Istanbul and two other cities for citizen and visa services as a precaution for Monday and Tuesday.

The embassy also issued an advisory to US citizens in Turkey "to avoid the areas around US government buildings, and exercise heightened caution in locations where Americans or foreigners may gather."

Dozens of angry Turks shouted slogans and held up banners at a rally on Monday outside the US consulate in Istanbul.

"Turkish people, stand up against American lies," said one banner. Another called on Turkey to shut down an air base US forces have been using since the Cold War.

Erdogan enjoyed a personal friendship with former US president Donald Trump that helped shield Turkey from various sanctions. Biden's administration has made human rights and other prickly issues a prominent feature of Turkish-US relations. "The level of Turkish-US relations has regressed," Erdogan said. But he added on a more optimistic note that he was "convinced that a new door can be opened when we meet in June" at the NATO meeting in Brussels.



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Turkey-US relations in the spotlight again after Biden's Armenia statement Biden says 1915 Armenian massacre constitutes genocide

[Drug-stuffed Syrian pomegranate shipment entered Lebanon in stages](#)

Mon, 2021-04-26 18:10

BEIRUT: A pomegranate shipment hiding millions of Captagon pills entered Lebanon in stages through the Masnaa border crossing with Syria, a customs source has told Arab News.

The narcotic-stuffed shipment was seized in Dammam last Friday and led Saudi Arabia to ban the import of agricultural produce from Lebanon.

On Monday President Michel Aoun said Lebanon was keen not to endanger the safety of any country, while caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab said neither Lebanon nor its people would accept any harm caused to the Saudis.

"We are with the Kingdom in combating smuggling networks and pursuing those involved," Diab said.

Preventing smuggling from Lebanon's borders was the focus of a meeting chaired by Aoun, with ministers and officials from security and customs services taking part.

Saudi Arabia was urged to "reconsider" its ban, which came into effect on Sunday, and Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi was assigned to communicate and coordinate with the Kingdom's authorities to "follow up the procedures to discover the perpetrators and prevent the recurrence of such odious practices."□

But a customs source revealed the scale of the challenge, as well sharing insights into the smuggling process.

"It is a constant war with smugglers and it needs advanced equipment while we work manually," the customs source told Arab News. "The quantity of pomegranates that contained Captagon tablets entered Lebanon in stages on more than one truck at the end of January through the Masnaa border crossing with Syria. Documents of the consignments indicated that the pomegranates were imported for internal Lebanese consumption and bear a certificate that they are of Syrian origin and not intended for transit."

The scanners that trucks and refrigerators passed through from Syria to Lebanon at land crossings and the port were defective. They were Chinese-made, 30 years old, and had not had any maintenance.

"So the goods are inspected manually. Customs at the Masnaa border crossing usually inspect 20 percent of the truckload in transit□."

The pomegranate consignments that entered in stages were collected in an abandoned hangar in the town of Taanayel in the central Bekaa.

They were re-loaded into Lebanese refrigerated trucks to export them to Saudi Arabia as a Lebanese product in the name of the Cedar Company, which was owned by two Syrians with cover from a Lebanese person who was a major shareholder.

The owners of the company paid all the fees due on the shipment and they were usually high.

"The smugglers know that transit goods from Syria to Saudi Arabia are subject to vigilant inspection."

Smugglers used Lebanese refrigerated trucks to avoid detection of their cargo because Saudi authorities had more confidence in dealing with the Lebanese side and the scrutiny was "less intense," according to the source.

The shipment set off from Lebanon in early February and needed about 15 days to reach Saudi Arabia by sea.

When the existence of drugs in the shipment was discovered in the Kingdom, authorities informed the Lebanese side before announcing it in the media.

Lebanese security services followed the course of the shipments, discovered what had happened in Taanayel and arrested the two Syrians, who were brothers.

The customs source told Arab News that Gulf states had long complained of drug smuggling operations to their territories from Syria via Lebanon.

"Lebanese security services have been keen to tighten supervision in this regard. However, drug traffickers always invent new unexpected methods."

One of the participants at the Monday meeting was the head of the Farmers and Peasants Association in the Bekaa Valley Ibrahim Tarshishi, who was hopeful about the ban being lifted.

"What we have heard about the measures that will be taken makes us optimistic about the possibility of reopening the borders to Lebanese agricultural products to the Gulf countries," he told Arab News.

He said 40 trucks loaded with Lebanese agricultural products were currently stuck between Beirut and Jeddah. "Their fate is unknown," he added.

Aoun stressed that smuggling of all kinds, including drugs, fuel and other materials, harmed Lebanon and "cost it dearly, and the recent smuggling operation to Saudi Arabia demonstrates this."

He asked about the reasons for the delay in purchasing scanners to be placed at crossings, even though the decision to do that was taken last July, and called for the swift completion of the purchasing process.

There was a statement from the meeting at the presidential palace about Lebanon's keenness on "maintaining the strength of fraternal relations" with Saudi Arabia and the condemnation of everything that would "prejudice its social security or the safety of its brotherly people, particularly the smuggling of prohibited and narcotic materials, especially since Lebanon categorically rejects that its facilities be a gateway for such disgraceful crimes."

The meeting also requested that exporters abide by the rules of foreign trade and to check exported products to preserve Lebanon's reputation.



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[Yemeni government denies AFP report of Houthi takeover of area northwest of Marib](#)

Sun, 2021-04-25 22:23

LONDON: Yemen's information minister on Sunday denied a news report stating that the Houthi militia had taken control of an area during fighting near Marib.

"We deny news published by Agence France Press (AFP) on the Iranian-backed Houthi militia's control over Kassara area, north-west of Marib," Moammar Al-Eryani tweeted.

He added that the Yemeni government expresses its deep regret that a global news agency has been subject to misinformation and has promoted "unfounded news".

The minister confirmed that the Yemeni military and its allies in Marib were holding their positions on various fronts.

"We call on media outlets and news agencies to observe credibility in dealing with Yemeni political and military developments and avoid falling victims to misinformation by the Iranian propaganda machine and the Houthi terrorist militia," the minister said.

Quoting military sources, AFP stated on Sunday that the Houthi militia had also advanced close to the center of Marib city despite heavy casualties.



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Houthis stuck in Marib military quagmire, experts say
Dozens of fighters killed in battles near Yemeni city of Marib

[UAE expresses solidarity with India by lighting up Burj Khalifa with flag](#)

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Sun, 2021-04-25 21:36

DUBAI: Burj Khalifa lit up in the colors of the Indian flag on Sunday evening in a sign of the UAE's solidarity with the coronavirus-ravaged country.

"Sending hope, prayers, and support to India and all its people during this challenging time," the iconic tower's official Twitter account stated, using hashtag #StayStrongIndia which was also displayed on Burj Khalifa.

Indians are the largest group of expatriates in the UAE.
India is facing a crisis as COVID-19 cases surge and oxygen and medical supplies are scarce.

نرسل رسالة أملٍ وتضامنٍ ودعمٍ للشعب الهندي في هذه الأوقات العصيبة ،
متمنين أن يتخطوا هذه المحنة بقوتهم واتحادهم #برج_خليفة

Sending hope, prayers, and support to India and all its people during this challenging time. [#BurjKhalifa](#) [#StayStrongIndia](#)
pic.twitter.com/y7M0Ei50P5

– Burj Khalifa (@BurjKhalifa) [April 25, 2021](#)

Patients' families are pleading for help on social media and India's crematoriums and burial grounds are being overwhelmed by the devastating new surge of infections tearing through the country at terrifying speed. India recorded 349,691 new cases and 2,767 deaths in the last 24 hours – the highest since the start of the pandemic. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan the US, the UK, France and the EU have all pledged to help India battle the crisis it faces. Saudi Arabia shipped 80 metric tons of liquid oxygen to India on Saturday and Pakistan has offered to provide its rival with relief support including ventilators, oxygen supply kits, digital X-ray machines, PPEs and and related items.



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Watch: Dubai's Burj Khalifa celebrates Shah Rukh Khan's birthday

[Iran International report: Zarif accused Soleimani of directing Iranian foreign policy](#)

Sun, 2021-04-25 20:25

LONDON: Iran's foreign minister said he was forced to sacrifice diplomacy in favor of operations by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, according to a leaked audio recording.

The three-hour interview with Mohammad Javad Zarif, which was [obtained by the London-based Iran International television channel](#), reveals the extent of the IRGC's control over foreign policy.

Zarif said Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Guard's Quds Force, which is responsible for overseas operations, had a direct hand over broader foreign policy.

Soleimani was killed in a US airstrike in Baghdad in January last year. As one of Iran's most powerful figures, he oversaw the regime's proxy militias in countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

According to Iran International, Zarif said Soleimani's influence meant he had to further a diplomacy that served Iran's military operations in the region.

"On the other hand, I have never been able to ask Soleimani to do something that would serve my diplomatic moves," he said.

He accused Soleimani of ignoring his pleas to refrain from using the Iranian national airline for transportation to Syria.

He said Soleimani's pressure led to a dramatic increase in flights to Damascus.

A number of Iranian airlines have been sanctioned for ferrying fighters and weapons into Syria to support Bashar Assad during the conflict.

The recording was an interview with journalist Saeed Laylaz in March but intended for publication after President Hassan Rouhani leaves office in August, the channel said.

Zarif said Iran prioritized its war operations over diplomacy and that his role in determining Iran's foreign policy was "nil."

He added that a visit by Soleimani to Moscow immediately after the 2015 nuclear deal was made was an attempt to destroy the agreement.



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