

Explosives-laden drone targets US forces at Iraq's Erbil airport

Wed, 2021-04-14 22:16

ERBIL: A drone dropped explosives near US forces stationed at Erbil airport in northern Iraq late on Wednesday, Kurdish officials said, with no immediate reports of casualties.

It was the first known attack carried out by an unmanned aerial drone against US forces in Erbil, amid a steady stream of rocket attacks on bases hosting US forces and the embassy in Baghdad that Washington blames on Iran-backed militias.

The interior ministry of the autonomous Kurdistan regional government, based in Erbil, said in a statement the drone was carrying TNT which it used to target the US forces. It said no one was hurt in the attack.

A group that Western and some Iraqi officials say is aligned with Iran praised the attack, but did not explicitly claim it.

A barrage of rockets hit the same US-led military base in the Erbil International Airport vicinity in February, killing a non-American contractor working with the US military.

Shortly before Wednesday's attack in Erbil, at least two rockets landed on and near a base to the west of the city that hosts Turkish forces, Iraqi security officials said.

Sirens at the US consulate in Erbil blared during the airport attack, witnesses said.

Turkey also has troops in Iraq both as part of a NATO contingent and a force that has attacked Kurdish separatist militants in the north.

The Iran-backed militias oppose both the presence of the United States and Turkey and demand a full withdrawal of all foreign troops.

The United States has sometimes responded with air strikes against Iran-aligned militias including on the Iraqi-Syrian border.



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Iran-backed groups behind Erbil rocket attack -Iraqi Kurdish security agency
Why was Iraqi Kurdistan's Irbil subjected to another rocket attack?

[Turkey frees journalist Altan after European rights court ruling](#)

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Wed, 2021-04-14 21:59

ISTANBUL : A Turkish court on Wednesday ordered the release of journalist and novelist Ahmet Altan after over four years in prison for involving in a failed 2016 coup attempt that he had always denied.

The Court of Cassation ruling came a day after the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) demanded the 71-year-old's freedom in a verdict that accused Turkey of violating his civil rights.

Altan's lawyer Figen Calikusu told AFP that the writer was released from the Silivri prison on Istanbul's western outskirts a few hours after the verdict was announced.

The award-winning novelist and newspaper editor was jailed after writing politically-sensitive articles and columns critical of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and supporting Kurdish rights.

The 71-year-old was arrested shortly after the putsch attempt as part of a purge of media organizations and accused of supporting the uprising by "disseminating subliminal messages to the public."

He was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment for trying to overthrow the government – a ruling that was later quashed by Turkey's top court. But the case was re-examined and he was sentenced to 10 years and six months in prison for "knowingly supporting a terrorist organization" that was involved in the 2016 coup attempt.

"Very happy to hear Turkey's Court of Cassation has just ordered the release of novelist Ahmet Altan after more than 4.5 years in jail," the European Parliament's Turkey rapporteur Nacho Sanchez Amor tweeted.

"Will be even happier after seeing him enjoying fully his freedom and all charges dropped. Hope all other (ECHR) rulings will be applied too."

The Court of Cassation ruling came as Erdogan mounts a charm offensive aimed at mending torn relations with the European Union and building a new rapport with the US administration of President Joe Biden.

EU leaders highlighted Turkey's deteriorating human rights record during a summit in Ankara last week.

Biden's White House has also made human rights a much bigger issue in US-Turkish relations than it had been in the former administration of Donald Trump.

Turkish officials argue that the courts are independent and not swayed by politics or Erdogan's whims.

But critics accuse Erdogan of stacking them with supporters during the sweeping purges that followed the coup attempt.

Western observers have thus been watching the case of Altan and some other famous prisoners for signs of Turkey's diplomatic intentions and future political course.

Perhaps the most celebrated case involves civil society leader Osman Kavala – in custody without a conviction for nearly four years and re-arrested after being cleared of all charges in 2019.

Altan was also briefly freed and cleared of all charges before being almost immediately rearrested in 2019.

The Court of Cassation ruling on Wednesday overturned his conviction in the 2019 case related to charges of "assisting a terrorist organization."

He had turned to the ECHR for help in 2017 after calling the charges against him "grotesque."

The Strasbourg-based rights court on Tuesday found "no evidence that the actions of the applicant had been part of a plan to overthrow the government."

It ordered Turkey to immediately release him and pay him 16,000 euros (\$19,000) in damages for violating his rights to freedom of expression.

"Deprivation of liberty, in particular continued detention, must be based on reasonable suspicion," the ECHR ruling said.

The ECHR "found that the applicant's criticisms of the president's political

approach could not be seen as an indication that he had had prior knowledge of the attempted coup,” it added.



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Top Turkish court reverses ban on news outlets Turkish court jails four in pro-Kurdish newspaper trial, lawyer says

[Remains of Daesh-beheaded Syrian archaeologist still missing](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2021-04-14 16:47

DAMASCUS: The remains of Khaled Al-Asaad, a Syrian archaeologist beheaded by

Daesh group extremists, have yet to be recovered, his son told AFP on Wednesday.

The official SANA news agency reported in February that authorities had uncovered three corpses in Kahloul, 10 kilometers (six miles) east of the ancient city of Palmyra where Al-Asaad was killed in 2015.

Al-Asaad was believed to be among them, SANA said at the time, ahead of DNA testing.

But two months later, DNA results have shown that the remains of the archaeologist have yet to be found, his son Tareq said.

“Authorities have just informed us that the DNA test results are not compatible with my father,” he said.

“Our sorrows and wounds have returned,” he said. “We had hoped to close this wound.”

Officials have yet to comment.

Al-Asaad, known as “the father of Palmyra,” was 83 when Daesh extremists executed him on August 18, 2015, three months after they overran the so-called “Pearl of the Desert.”

Seen as a pioneer of Syrian archaeology, Al-Asaad was director of antiquities in Palmyra for 40 years until 2003.

He was responsible for the discovery of several ancient cemeteries and oversaw the excavation of 1,000 columns as well as the site’s stunning necropolis of 500 tombs.



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Archaeologists restore ancient Palmyra artefacts in Damascus museum
Syrian regime retakes town of Palmyra

[Israel shocked by self-immolation of traumatized ex-soldier](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-04-14 00:33

JERUSALEM: Israel was shaken Tuesday after a 26-year-old former soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder since the 2014 Gaza war set himself on fire, suffering severe injuries.

Itzik Saidian went to a support service for wounded soldiers near Tel Aviv on Monday, doused himself with a flammable liquid and lit it, "due to significant psychological distress," the army said.

He was rushed to the intensive care unit of Tel Hashomer Hospital near Tel Aviv and was in "critical condition" with "deep burns all over his body," the hospital said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was "very shocked" and "determined to undertake a complete reform of the way we take care of our disabled and wounded veterans."

The young man had been recognized as partially disabled because he suffered from PTSD related to his service during the 2014 war between Israel and the armed Islamist movement Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Around 2,250 Palestinians were killed in the war, mostly civilians, and 74 Israelis, mostly soldiers.

Saidian's self-immolation came on the eve of Israel's Remembrance Day for fallen soldiers and attack victims.

It sparked controversy over the support system for wounded or psychologically ill soldiers, which is often deemed inefficient and bureaucratic.

"He saw horrible things and nobody took care of him," his tearful brother Avi Saidian told journalists at the hospital.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz announced a "thorough investigation to find the reasons for this tragic event." His ministry pledged to "substantially improve the treatment of post-traumatic soldiers."

Military service is mandatory in Israel for 18-year-olds. Women serve two years and men two years and six months.



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Israeli-owned ship attacked off UAE coast
Israeli troops arrest 25
Palestinians in occupied West Bank

[Lebanon's president says new maritime claim needs government approval](#)

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Tue, 2021-04-13 21:35

BEIRUT: Lebanon's president said on Tuesday a draft decree expanding its maritime claims in a dispute with Israel must be approved by the caretaker government, rejecting a request to grant it swift presidential approval. The dispute with Israel over the maritime boundary has held up hydrocarbon exploration in a potentially gas-rich area of the eastern Mediterranean. The decree, approved by Lebanon's caretaker prime minister, defense minister and minister of public work on Monday, would add around 1,400 square km (540 square miles) to an exclusive economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean claimed by Lebanon.

Caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab's office said the decree should be approved by President Michel Aoun so that the new maritime coordinates setting out Lebanon's claim could be submitted to the United Nations. But the presidency said it should be approved by Diab's full cabinet, even though the government resigned eight months ago following a devastating explosion in Beirut, because of the gravity of the issue. The draft decree "needs a collective decision from the council of ministers..., even under a caretaker government, due to its importance and the consequences," a statement from Aoun's office said. Aoun's decision could significantly delay the process. Since the government resigned in August it has referred all issues for exceptional approval by the president, leaving them to get formal endorsement when a new government is finally agreed. Negotiations were launched in October to try to resolve the dispute with Israel yet the talks, a culmination of three years of diplomacy by the United States, have since stalled. Israel already pumps gas from offshore fields but Lebanon has yet to find commercial gas reserves in its own waters. Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said on Monday Lebanon's expanded claim would derail the talks rather than help work toward a common solution, warning that Israel would implement "parallel measures." Lebanon, in the throes of a deep financial meltdown that is threatening its stability, is desperate for cash as it faces the worst economic crisis since its 1975-1990 civil war. But political leaders have failed to bridge their differences and form a new government.



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Lebanon extends area claimed in border dispute with IsraelIsraeli-owned ship attacked off UAE coast