

Turkey in fresh war of words with US over coup plot accusation

Author:

Sat, 2021-02-06 03:36

ANKARA: Turkey has reignited its war of words with the US after a senior Turkish minister accused Washington of being behind the country's failed 2016 coup.

Suleyman Soylu, Turkey's interior minister, blamed the US for orchestrating the failed overthrow attempt and for hosting preacher Fethullah Gulen, who has been accused of controlling the uprising through a deep cover network hidden within the Turkish state.

Washington further fanned the flames in statements claiming that Turkey initiated a "disproportionate crackdown" on domestic student protests. The accusations come as Turkey looks to repair strained ties with the US following last year's sanctions over the sale of Russia's S-400 air defense system.

Ankara has opened several diplomatic channels with regional rivals, including Greece, France and Israel, and has halted aggressive moves in the Mediterranean as a goodwill gesture to the Biden administration.

Max Hoffman, a Turkey analyst from the Washington-based Center for American Progress, said that Soylu's accusation could be connected to an ongoing domestic power struggle within Turkey.

"I have to wonder at a certain point if Soylu is actively trying to undermine Erdogan. The official line is clearly to try for a reset. The economy is in shambles. And Soylu is the conservative heir apparent," he said.

The US State Department has condemned the accusation as "unfounded and irresponsible."

"The US had no involvement in the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey and promptly condemned it. Recent assertions to the contrary made by senior Turkish officials are wholly false," it said.

Washington's rejection of Turkish demands for Gulen's extradition have angered Ankara in the past.

Experts have said that the Biden administration will be tougher on Turkey over its human rights and democratization record, contrary to the hands-off approach put forward by previous administrations.

It remains to be seen how Biden's team will push for harder lines on Turkey's democratic record, considering its status as a NATO ally.

"Contrary to Turkey-EU relations, Ankara's relationship with Washington doesn't have concrete elements such as financial support to refugees or a customs union as the centerpieces of their dealings," Marc Pierini, an academic and former EU envoy to Turkey, told Arab News.

He said that Ankara "cannot attempt to leave rule-of-law issues on the side when talking to Washington."

Turkey has blamed "foreign meddling" for playing a role in ongoing student protests throughout the country, with a harshly worded foreign ministry statement pointing to a "US finger" in the demonstrations.

"We warn certain circles abroad not to use language provoking groups that

resort to illegal ways and encourage illegal actions,” the statement said. Police attacks on protesters in Turkey have alarmed Washington. About 600 people have been detained, with protests spreading to major cities and the government labeling demonstrators “terrorists.”

On Friday, a group of 3,317 academics around the world released a joint statement criticizing Turkey and calling for the resignation of Bogazici University’s new rector Melih Bulu, who was appointed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a political loyalist.

US activist Noam Chomsky branded the student protests as “courageous and honorable.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Turkey keeps opposition activist in solitary confinement
Turkey rejects criticism of its handling of student protest

[In Saddam strongholds that fought America, Iraqis fear US departure](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-02-06 03:27

FALLUJAH: Abu Arkan Ibrahim picked up a rifle and joined the Iraqi insurgency against US troops when they occupied his hometown of Fallujah in 2003. He was badly burned in the fighting. Now, he fears the departure of the Americans he once battled.

Over the past 17 years, the municipal employee has watched his city fall to

the US, Al-Qaeda, Daesh and, most recently, Iraqi forces fighting alongside Iran-backed paramilitaries.

Ibrahim said the presence of US troops in recent years helped suppress remaining Daesh militants and rein in the Iran-backed militias – mutual foes accused by Iraqi officials of attacking locals.

The US troop drawdown is creating a security vacuum, Ibrahim said, making Fallujah more dangerous. “I’d rather have the Americans here than the alternatives,” the 37-year old said.

Ibrahim’s assessment is shared by many security officials, former fighters and residents in north and west regions of the country that comprise up to a third of Iraqi territory, former insurgent strongholds once loyal to Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein.

They say Daesh and the Iran-backed paramilitaries stand to gain most from Washington’s troop reduction. They point to an increase in attacks by Daesh, and fear the Iran-backed militias will use this violence to justify entrenching themselves.

Last month, the US completed a reduction of its forces in Iraq to 2,500 troops. That’s about half the level of less than a year ago.

Recent months have witnessed more than 25 deadly attacks that Iraqi officials attribute to Daesh militants. Last month, the group staged its biggest attack in years with a suicide bombing in the capital Baghdad that killed more than 30 people.

The administration of President Joe Biden has given no indication it intends to significantly reverse the drawdown started under predecessor Donald Trump.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)
[Fallujah](#)

Battle for hearts and minds in Fallujah
After liberation from Daesh, Fallujah struggles to rebuild

Turkey keeps opposition activist in solitary confinement

Author:

Sat, 2021-02-06 01:45

ISTANBUL: An Istanbul court ruled to keep renowned Turkish activist and businessman Osman Kavala behind bars in solitary confinement on Friday in the high-profile second trial of Kavala and Turkish-American academic Henri Barkey. The court also merged the current case with the landmark anti-government Gezi Park protests' trial.

Amid anti-American conspiracy theories about the involvement of the US in orchestrating the failed coup attempt in 2016, Barkey and Kavala are being tried on espionage charges and accusations of helping the coup attempt. If convicted, they face life sentences.

Speaking in his defense on Friday Kavala said that as the knowledge of the falseness of allegations against him is more and more publicized, each refusal of his bail becomes an increasingly egregious rights violation.

Kavala's co-defendant Barkey, an American citizen, is being tried in absentia.

Kavala, who was first detained in October 2017 and remanded in pre-trial detention on Nov. 1, 2017, has been behind bars ever since. Although he was acquitted of all charges in the anti-government Gezi Park protests in February 2020, he was then accused of overthrowing the constitutional order and of espionage. Kavala has been behind bars for 1193 days without conviction.

The Kavala case is seen as a way for Turkey's rulers to threaten other activists that push for Western values such as pluralism, democratization and human rights in the country.

Nine European rights ambassadors from Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden released a joint declaration on Thursday calling for the immediate release of Kavala and expressed "great concern" over the rule of law, human rights and judiciary record in Turkey.

The ambassadors also urged Ankara to implement binding judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

“The continued imprisonment of Osman Kavala in Turkey is politically motivated and goes against judgments of the European Court of Human Rights,” Barbel Kofler, German human rights commissioner, tweeted.

In 2019, ECHR ruled that Kavala’s extended detention had an “ulterior purpose, namely to reduce him to silence as an NGO activist and human rights defender, to dissuade other persons from engaging in such activities and to paralyze civil society in the country” and therefore violated the European Convention on Human Rights that Turkey is bound to respect as a state party.

Turkey insists on defying the rulings of the court not only for Kavala case but also for Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas, who has also been kept behind bars for years.

Speaking at the Parliamentary Assembly on Jan. 25, the Council of Europe’s Secretary-General Marija Pejcinovic Buric warned Ankara that compliance with the ECHR ruling on the Kavala case is not “a kind request,” but rather “a binding legal requirement.”

Although the case of Kavala and Barkey has not been prioritized in the bilateral agenda of Ankara and the Biden administration, the criminal proceedings against an American citizen might draw US engagement about improving the rule of law with its strategic partners, experts note.

Merve Tahiroglu, Turkey program coordinator at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), said Biden took a welcome U-turn from Trump’s brazen embrace of global strongmen and has begun to follow a foreign policy that emphasizes democracy and human rights.

“Already in a few weeks in office, his administration has been more outspoken on Erdogan’s repression in Turkey than his predecessors. I think they are watching this case very closely as well,” she told Arab News.

According to Tahiroglu, Kavala’s unjust prosecution singularly reflects the complete erosion of the rule of law, the repression of Turkish civil society, and the weaponization of anti-Western conspiracy theories against government critics.

During a speech on Feb. 5, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan targeted Kavala’s wife, Ayse Bugra. Bugra is a well-known academic who teaches at Istanbul’s prestigious Bogazici University, which became a scene of protests from academics and students for more than a month after the appointment of a political figure – and a loyalist to Erdogan – as the new rector.

“The wife of Osman Kavala, the person who is the representative of Soros in this country, is a person who is among these provocateurs at Bogazici University,” Erdogan said, following similar statements he gave in the past by accusing Kavala of being the agent of US financier George Soros.

Kavala turned to the Constitutional Court last year, saying his illicit

detention violated his right to liberty and security. The court ruled on Dec. 29 that his detention was not a violation.

“Last year, the judges who ordered the acquittal of the Gezi trial defendants, including Kavala, were quickly put under investigation. The latest comments by President Erdogan represent another proof that this is a politically motivated prosecution,” said Amnesty International’s Turkey campaigner, Milena Buyum.

Kavala’s next trial will be held on May 21. The Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers will resume its examination of Kavala’s case in March 2021.

According to Buyum, the court ruling on Friday confirmed once again that the continuous calls of ECHR and its criticisms about political motivations behind the arrest were real.

“It is not a trial; it is a direct punishment. There is no single evidence that Kavala tried to overthrow the constitutional order,” she said.

ECHR found that article 18 of the European Convention of Human Rights was violated through Kavala’s arrest. Article 18 determines the limitation on the use of restrictions on rights.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Turkey](#)

[Osman Kavala](#)

Two years on, Turkish dissident remains behind bars Turkish rights activist Kavala’s prison term extended

[Former Trump diplomat warns of rising Russian influence in Middle East](#)

Sat, 2021-02-06 00:55

CHICAGO: Russia is aggressively competing to replace American interests in the Middle East in a way not seen since the 1973 Arab-Israeli “October War,” the former US envoy to Syria under President Donald Trump warned on Friday.

James F. Jeffrey, now chairman of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, said during a media briefing that Moscow’s interests in the region are not restricted to Syria or working with Iran, but extend to forging alliances with regional players such as Turkey and Iraq.

He added that Russia is leveraging the approach of the new US administration to Iran in its efforts to build stronger alliances.

“Russia is very active in the region,” he said. “(In) the two areas where it is militarily present, Libya and Syria, it has been stymied largely by Turkish military responses, particularly in Syria, with some American diplomatic support.

“But Russia is trying its very best to present an alternative security architecture for the region. (The Russians) are our competition in the region as much as the Iranians are.

“That (growing Russian influence) is a new factor that was not present in any major way during the Obama administration. That is something I would urge the Biden administration to focus on; the problem with Russia in the region is very important.”

Jeffrey added that the message the Kremlin is sending to regional powers is clear, and that it is threatening US interests by implying support for Iran.

READ MORE: [Biden strikes tough tone on Russia in diplomatic push](#)

“Now you have a third factor – for the first time since the Yom Kippur War (another name for the October War) or perhaps Afghanistan in the 1980s – which is an active Russian presence in the region, which is a potential security alternative to the US,” he said.

“I would urge the (Biden) administration to pay attention to that because it is something new.”

Jeffrey said that while President Joe Biden is keen for a quick return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, he should be wary of Russia positioning itself to expand its alliances in the region by using Syria and Iran as bases.

Any reduction of US presence in the region could lead to even closer ties between Tehran and Moscow, which would increase the confidence of the Iranian regime, he added.

Jeffrey also described the ongoing conflict in Syria as “the biggest mistake of the Obama administration” because it is “a military stalemate” that Russia could manipulate in the hope of becoming a force equal to the US in the region.

Biden outlined his own concerns about Russia on Thursday, as he distanced himself from the position taken by the Trump administration.

“I made it clear to President (Vladimir) Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days of the US rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions – interfering with our elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens – are over,” he said.

“We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people. And we will be more effective in dealing with Russia when we work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners.”

Jeffrey also predicted on Friday that the Biden administration will retain the sanctions placed on Turkey by Trump in the weeks before he left office. They were imposed in response to Ankara’s purchase of the Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, which the West views as a threat to NATO and the US F35 Lightning II advanced stealth surveillance and combat jet.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)
[Donald Trump](#)
[Iran](#)
[Russia](#)
[US President Joe Biden](#)

Biden strikes tough tone on Russia in diplomatic push Russia-Iran cooperation in Syria sends message to US

Blinken discusses Iran with UK, French, German ministers

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1612558554148315300

Fri, 2021-02-05 20:24

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed Iran and other issues on Friday in a virtual meeting with his British, French and German counterparts as the group weighs how to revive the Iran nuclear deal. "We just had a in-depth and important conversation on Iran ... to handle together nuclear and regional security challenges," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Twitter, adding other issues were also addressed. The high-level conversation is the latest step by President Joe Biden's new administration to explore how to restore the 2015 nuclear deal that Iran signed with world powers but was abandoned in 2018 by Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price declined to comment on the substance of the meeting, but said Washington wanted "to make sure that we are working in lockstep with our European partners" on Iran.

Earlier, a US official said the meeting between Blinken, Le Drian, Britain's Dominic Raab and Germany's Heiko Maas would also cover the coronavirus pandemic, Russia, China, Myanmar and climate.

The nuclear deal limited Iran's uranium enrichment activity to make it harder for Tehran to develop nuclear arms – an ambition Iran has long denied having – in return for the easing of US and other sanctions.

In abandoning the deal approved by former President Barack Obama, Trump restored the US sanctions it had removed and then piled on more.

Biden, who took office last month, has said that if Tehran returned to strict compliance with the 2015 nuclear pact, Washington would follow suit and use that as a springboard to a broader agreement that might restrict Iran's missile development and regional activities.

Tehran has insisted that Washington ease sanctions before it resumed compliance, and ruled out negotiations on wider security issues. But Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hinted on Monday at a way to resolve the

impasse over who goes first by saying the steps could be synchronized.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[France](#)

[US](#)

[Britain](#)

[Germany](#)

[Iran](#)

Amnesty, UN raise alarm over Iran minority executions
Time to crack down on Iran: European politicians