

US designates Bahrain, UAE 'major security partners'

Sun, 2021-01-17 00:57

DUBAI: The US called Bahrain and the UAE "major security partners" early on Saturday, a previously unheard of designation for the two countries home to major American military operations.

A White House statement tied the designation to Bahrain and the UAE normalizing ties to Israel, saying it "reflects their extraordinary courage, determination and leadership." It also noted the two countries long have taken part in US military exercises.

It's unclear what the designation means for Bahrain and the UAE.

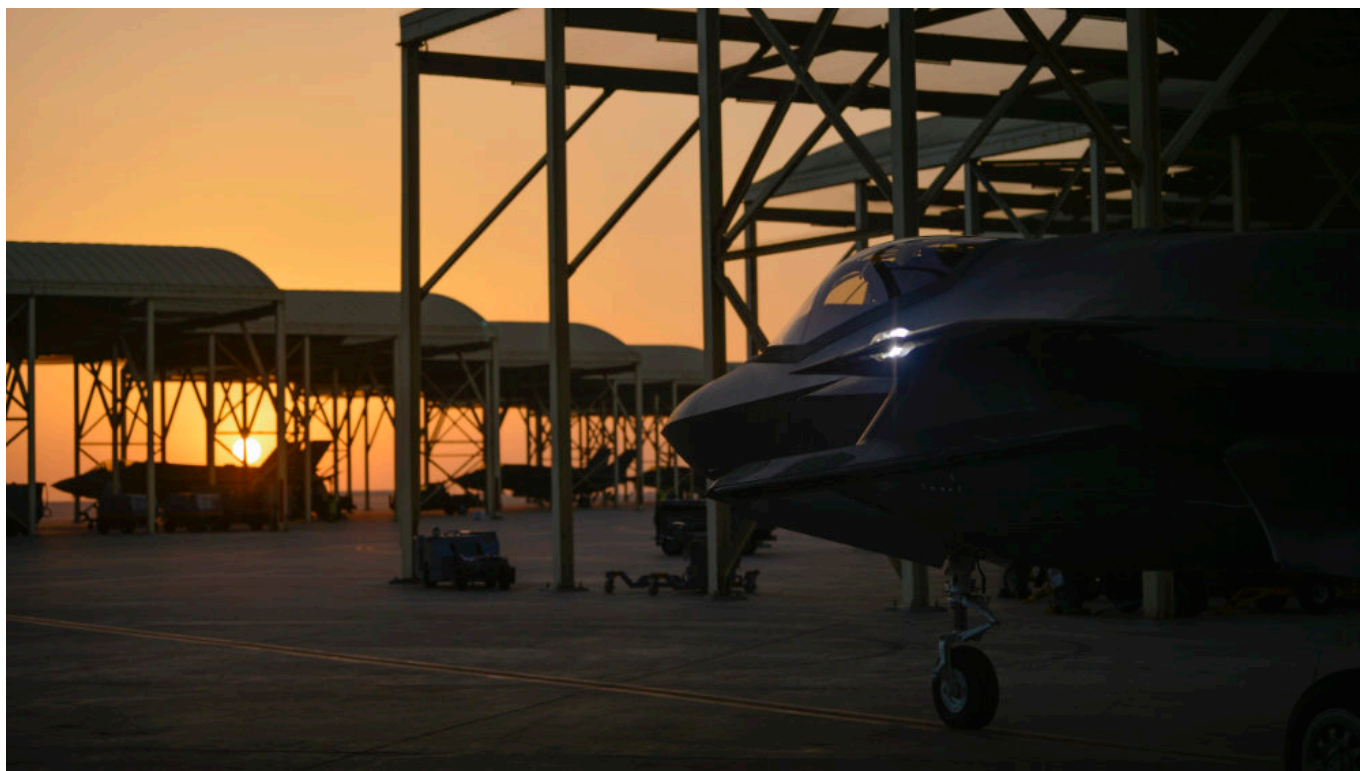
Bahrain is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet, while the UAE's Jebel Ali port is the busiest port of call for American warships outside of the US. Bahrain hosts some 5,000 American troops, while the UAE hosts 3,500, many at Al-Dhafra Air Base.

Already, the US uses the designation of "major non-NATO ally" to describe its relationship with Kuwait, which hosts the forward command of US Army Central. That designation grants a country special financial and military considerations for nations not part of NATO. Bahrain also is a non-NATO ally. The US military's Central Command and the Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The 5th Fleet referred queries to the State Department, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The White House designation comes in the final days of President Donald Trump's administration.

Trump forged close ties to Gulf Arab countries during his time in office in part over his hard-line stance on Iran.

That's sparked a series of escalating incidents between the countries after Trump unilaterally withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers.

It also comes after Bahrain and the UAE joined Egypt and Saudi Arabia in beginning to resolve a yearslong boycott of Qatar, that houses Al-Udeid Air Base.



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European powers blast Iran over new work on nuclear bomb fuel

[32 killed and 79 injured during deadly clashes between Arabs and non-Arabs in Sudan's West Darfur](#)

Author:

Sun, 2021-01-17 00:51

CAIRO: Clashes between Arabs and non-Arabs in Sudan's West Darfur have killed at least 32 people, according to a local medical official, as Sudanese authorities imposed a round-the-clock curfew on the province.

Darfur remains scarred by war after a rebellion in the early 2000s was brutally suppressed. The most recent violence comes two weeks after the UN Security Council ended the joint UN-African Union peacekeeping force's mandate in the Darfur region.

Salah Saleh, a doctor and former medical director at the main hospital in the provincial capital of Genena, said the clashes wounded at least 79 others. "It's horrible," he said. "Until now, people cannot reach any hospitals." Salah warned that the casualty toll was likely much higher. The violence erupted on Friday in Genena, when an Arab man was stabbed to death at a market in the Krinding camp for internally displaced people, aid worker Al-Shafei Abdalla said. He said the suspect was arrested.

On Saturday, the dead man's family – from the Arab Rizeigat tribe – attacked the Krinding camp, burning most of its houses, said Abdalla.

Gov. Mohammed Abdalla Al-Douma said the government would impose a curfew that would include the closure of all markets and a ban on gatherings across the province. Al-Douma granted security forces and soldiers a mandate to use force to control the situation.

The prime minister's office in Khartoum said in a statement a high-ranking delegation led by the country's top prosecutor would head to Genena "to take necessary measures" to re-establish stability in West Darfur. The statement did not give a casualty toll from the clashes.

Adam Regal, a spokesman for a local organization that helps run refugee camps in Darfur, shared footage showing the burned homes and property in the Krinding camp following Saturday's attack.

The video included graphic images of wounded people with blood-stained clothes. The footage also showed women and children carrying their belongings, allegedly fleeing clashes in the camp.



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UN says breakthrough achieved in Libya transition talks

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Sat, 2021-01-16 20:14

CAIRO: The top UN official for Libya said Saturday that an advisory committee for representatives of Libya's different regions has proposed a way forward for choosing a transitional government that would lead the war-torn country to elections late this year.

The talks in Geneva, structured around the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, have been taking place amid a heavy international push to reach a peaceful settlement to Libya's civil war. Previous diplomatic initiatives have all collapsed.

UN acting envoy for Libya Stephanie Williams told a news conference in Geneva that the advisory committee's members "have met their responsibility with a constructive spirit, cooperative efforts, and a great deal of patriotism." The committee is part of a 75-member forum that represents all the three main regions of Libya. The 18-member committee has proposed that each region's electoral college name a representative to a three-member presidential council, Williams said. A prime minister would be chosen by the 75-member forum. A successful nominee should receive 70% of votes.

Williams said that the forum would resort to lists formed from Libya's three regions, with each list consisting of four names, nominated for the presidential council and a prime minister position.

She said a list should obtain 17 endorsements: eight from the western region, six from the eastern region and three from southern Libya. The winning list should receive 60% of the votes of the 75-member forum in the first round. A run-up is expected if no list received the required votes, she said.

Williams said the forum would vote on the proposed mechanism on Monday and the results are expected the following day.

The transitional government would be "a temporary unified executive staffed by Libyan patriots who want to share responsibility rather than to divide the cake," the UN acting envoy said.

The US welcomed the breakthrough and urged all parties of Libya "to work with urgency and in good faith" to establish an interim government, according to a statement by the US Embassy in Libya.

"It is time to move past the conflict and corruption facilitated by the status quo," it said.

The forum is part of the UN efforts to end the chaos that engulfed the oil-

rich North African nation after the 2011 overthrow and killing of dictator Muammar Qaddafi. It has reached an agreement last year to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on Dec. 24, 2021.

The oil-rich country is now split east to west between two rival administrations, each backed by an array of militias and foreign powers. The warring sides agreed to a UN-brokered cease-fire in October in Geneva, a deal that included the departure of foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya within three months.

No progress was announced on the issue of foreign forces and mercenaries since they inked the cease-fire deal almost two months ago.



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UN chief Guterres tries again to appoint a Libya mediator
UN chief recommends Libya cease-fire monitors be based in Sirte

Tunisian premier announces major cabinet reshuffle

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Sat, 2021-01-16 19:09

TUNIS: Tunisia's Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi announced on Saturday a major cabinet reshuffle affecting 12 ministries, in the wake of high-profile sackings.

"The aim of this reshuffle is to achieve greater efficiency in the work of the government," Mechichi said at a press conference in the capital Tunis. The new line-up, which does not include any women, must be approved by parliament.

A few hours before the announcement, Mechichi had met with President Kais Saied, who insisted the "integrity" of proposed ministers should "raise no doubt," according to a statement from the presidency.

"There is no place (in the government) for people who are subject to legal proceedings" or to "doubts about their background or their behavior that could undermine the state and the credibility of its institutions and the legitimacy of its decisions," Saied said.

One of the officials to be replaced is former environment minister Mustapha Aroui, who was sacked and arrested in December in a scandal over hundreds of containers of household waste shipped from Italy.

Chiheb Ben Ahmed, CEO of the Tunisian Export Promotion Center (CEPEX), was proposed as his replacement.

Cabinet chief Walid Dhahbi has been put forward as interior minister to replace Taoufik Charfeddine.

The former lawyer and pillar of Saied's election campaign was sacked earlier this month over high-level staffing changes he sought to make to some security agencies, according to a previous statement from Mechichi.

The reshuffle also impacts the ministries of health, justice, industry, energy and agriculture.

Ten years after the uprising that led to the fall of long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia has successfully transformed into a democracy – albeit one still riven by corruption and economic pain.

The country has had nine governments in 10 years, but the transfers of power have been peaceful.

However, since a general election in 2019, the political class has been more fragmented than ever and paralyzed by infighting, fueling discontent over the continued economic malaise, which has been exacerbated by the novel coronavirus pandemic.



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[How Iran serves as 'a key geographic hub for Al-Qaeda'](#)

Sat, 2021-01-16 22:06

WASHINGTON, DC: Mike Pompeo, the outgoing US secretary of state, made a splash last week when he unveiled new intelligence pointing to an enduring operational relationship between the regime in Iran and Al-Qaeda's international terror network.

Although senior Al-Qaeda operatives are long known for using Iran as a transit point and shelter, what many policymakers and the general public have

failed to grasp is just how vital the safe haven offered by the Islamic Republic has become to Al-Qaeda's survival.

Iran is now officially the last government in the world that knowingly harbors and facilitates Al-Qaeda activity. Revelations concerning the full extent of this nexus come as Iran accelerates its drive towards nuclear-weapons capability with threats and warnings that are a belated wake-up call for world leaders.



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed that arch-enemy Iran has become a new "home base" for Al-Qaeda worse than Afghanistan. (AFP/File Photo)

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s extraterritorial Quds Force has worked behind the scenes as a driver of both Tehran's illicit nuclear program and its facilitation of the terrorist activities of senior Al-Qaeda leaders who have sought refuge in Iran.

Concurrently, the Quds Force has used the threat of Al-Qaeda as a justification for the expansion of its Shiite militia proxies in Syria and Iraq. In reality of course, key figures in Al-Qaeda's central command have been traveling to Syria and establishing a foothold there with the connivance of their Quds Force patrons.

Anyone in search of proof need look no further than the sanctuary provided by Iran to Al-Qaeda's chief military strategist Saif Al-Adel, who masterminded the 2003 bombings of residential compounds in Riyadh, killing 39 and injuring 160.

Al-Adel, whose real name is believed to be Mohammed Salah Al-Din Zaidan, has

emerged as a key emissary for Al-Qaeda's operations in Syria and has even traveled there from Iran. Other senior Al-Qaeda operatives who were based in Iran before traveling to Syria include Muhsin Al-Fadhli, a former leader the group's Iran-based facilitation network, and Sanafi Al-Nasr, a senior operative who was given free rein to continue terrorist activities under the watchful eye of the Iranian government.

Against this backdrop, the Trump administration's focus in its waning days on Iran's emergence as a major Al-Qaeda hub is significant on several counts.

Above all, it intimates that the US and its allies can no longer turn a blind eye to the Iranian regime's complicity in Al-Qaeda activity, which was politically inconvenient for them during efforts to establish a nuclear deal at any cost.

The offer of a \$7 million reward by Pompeo for information leading to the capture or killing of Abd Al-Rahman Al-Maghrebi, the son-in-law and senior advisor to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and commander of Al-Qaeda's operations from Tehran, is a strong indicator of this shift.

Given that the incoming Biden administration will be composed of Obama-era officials who were involved in negotiating the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran (also known as JCPOA), a push to link sanctions on Iran to its continued support for Al-Qaeda (in addition to its stepped-up nuclear program) could offer US policymakers greater leverage.

"The relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda has long been understated if not ignored in Washington," Richard Goldberg, former Director for Countering Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Trump White House, told Arab News.

"Putting a bounty on the head of a top Al-Qaeda operative living in Iran forces the incoming Biden administration to confront Iran's sponsorship of terrorism across the spectrum. There's no more hiding this dangerous relationship."

THE NUMBER

\$7 million

*** US reward for information on 'Iran-based Al-Qaeda leader Muhammad Abbatay, also known as Abd Al-Rahman Al-Maghrebi.'**

Iran lives in hope that its strategy of denial and deceit will succeed. During negotiations with the Obama administration, Iranian officials such as Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif had attempted to spin the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions as necessary Western concessions for Iran to be able to focus on the real threat of fighting extremist groups, namely Daesh

and Al-Qaeda.

For similar reasons, Iran desperately tried to cover up the suspected Israeli killing of one of Al-Qaeda's most prolific terror masterminds, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, in August last year, when he was gunned down in the middle of Tehran.

Abdullah's elimination came as many Al-Qaeda operatives in Iran were being given a freer hand to operate and open nodes of communication and travel for the wider terrorist network.

For Iran, the ends justify the means, despite what to the casual observer may seem like a clash of worldviews between the Shiite theocracy and the Sunni radical Al-Qaeda.

"Many people think that because Al-Qaeda's ideology reviles Shiites that it could never cooperate with the Islamic Republic, and vice versa. But the hard men running Al-Qaeda and Iran do not simply behave according to their ideologies," Michael Doran, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, told Arab News.

"In terms of ideology, yes, Al-Qaeda and Iran are enemies. In terms of power and political interests, however, they are natural allies."



Members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) march during the annual military parade marking the anniversary of the outbreak of the 1980-1988 war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. (AFP/File Photo)

The need for heightened awareness in Western capitals of Iran's enabling of Al-Qaeda is underscored by Iran's parallel efforts to advance its nuclear

program in plain sight of the world. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) told the UN Security Council last week that Tehran has continued to “reduce its commitments” to restrictions imposed by the JCPOA.

The confidential IAEA report, obtained by CBS News, says Iran has started to manufacture equipment used to produce uranium metal at a facility in Isfahan. Uranium metal can be used to make the core of a nuclear warhead, although it is unclear yet when or if Iran might start producing the material.

Pointing out that the JCPOA “prohibits Iran from producing uranium metals for 15 years, and has additional curbs on Tehran conducting research and development on uranium metal in certain facilities,” the CBS News report quoted the IAEA report as saying that “Iran is making its departure from those commitments clear.”

According to Western intelligence agencies, recent Israeli airstrikes that targeted the IRGC’s Quds Force infrastructure in eastern Syria were intended to disrupt an overland delivery route that Iran has been using to transport smuggled components for its nuclear program.

This is an area on the Syrian-Iraqi border where Iran has developed a massive base of operations alongside thousands of trained Shiite foreign fighters under the guise of fighting extremism.

Unsurprisingly, the need for cooperation in the fight against terrorism was a core talking point pushed by Zarif before 2015 in public speeches and media appearances while attempting to convince American and European policymakers to finalize the JCPOA and subsequently lift sanctions on Iran, particularly those targeting the IRGC.



A missile launcher parked on a warship named after slain Naval commander Abdollah Roudaki, sailing through the waters in the Gulf during its

inauguration. (AFP/Iran's Revolutionary Guard via Sepah News/File Photo)

Now it seems clearer than ever that Iran was emboldened to boost Al-Qaeda's terrorist capabilities as it benefited financially from the windfall that resulted from the sealing of the nuclear deal.

"Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Republic have a long history of working together. The Al-Qaeda leadership even lives openly in Tehran," Alireza Nader, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, told Arab News.

"Of course, Zarif and his allies are very sensitive about these ties as they might complicate their plan to ease US pressure on the regime."

So now the question will be whether a new administration in Washington will take these lessons to heart and accept there is little strategic logic in pressuring Iran to end its nuclear aspirations without an equally aggressive push to unequivocally eliminate the Al-Qaeda leadership's presence in the country.

As things currently stand, experts say, Iran will almost certainly use any sanctions relief under a nuclear deal redux to expand the footprint of its militias in the Middle East and to perpetuate the symbiotic relationship it has nurtured with Al-Qaeda.

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US imposes fresh sanctions on Iran in final days of Trump presidency