

Turkey, Greece set for historic East Med talks

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-13 22:10

ANKARA: A first round of new exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece will take place this month following Ankara's offer to discuss conflicting territorial claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The talks are set to take place in Istanbul on Jan. 25.

It will be the 61st round of exploratory talks to be held in the past 14 years, but previous meetings mainly focused on issues related to the Aegean Sea.

Athens is expected to focus discussions on maritime zones in the Aegean and East Med in line with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), while Ankara has not set any pre-conditions for the talks.

Turkey is not a signatory of UNCLOS and does not recognize the government of Cyprus, an EU member.

Rauf Mammadov, resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, told Arab News that any direct dialogue was a positive step toward reconciliation between the conflicting parties.

"The dialogue is also the sole non-conflict method toward resolving the disagreement in this particular case.

"The gist of the dispute between the two NATO members rests on a competing interpretation of international law. The alternative to talks is regular diplomatic feuds, sometimes accompanied by threats of military escalation," he said.

However, Oxford University Middle East analyst Samuel Ramani said that a short-term diplomatic breakthrough in the Med standoff between Greece and Turkey was "unlikely" to happen.

"Levels of trust on both sides are extremely low and both sides see any diplomatic overture as an image-branding exercise to the international community, rather than a sincere attempt to de-escalate the crisis," he added.

Ramani said it was "unsurprising" that Turkey offered to stage talks with Greece, as Ankara had hinted toward it previously.

"The only path to convergence in the Eastern Mediterranean is for some of the tensions around the Greece-Turkey dispute to ease. Turkey's recent overtures toward France are a positive step, as are the UAE's recent statements on de-escalating with Turkey," he added.

Turkey rejects the maritime boundary claims of Greece and Cyprus, claiming they violate the sovereign rights of both Turkey and Northern Cyprus.

Experts have also underlined the importance of the announcement's timing.

"Ankara and Athens are taking steps toward a potential compromise as the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) becomes operational. The project is a rare example of continuing economic cooperation between two neighboring nations," Mammadov said.

He added that a possible resolution to the East Med energy dispute would be successful if driven by mutually beneficial economic interests, similar to the SGC.

Charles Ellinas, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, told Arab News that the incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden must be of concern to Turkey, especially given that within a short length of time it had become the subject of sanctions both from the EU and America.

"It is very important that aggressive language and threats should be avoided. The recent warning from (Turkish President Recep Yayıp) Erdogan to the EU that in case it supports Greece, Turkey will return back to offshore surveys and further escalate the dispute, is not constructive," he said.

Ellinas added that without a change in direction, Turkey was likely to face a difficult time with Biden, while a constructive start to discussions with Greece would be seen quite positively by the EU and the US.

On the other hand, both countries are hoping for stronger support from Washington in consolidating their regional gains and pushing for their "red lines" ahead of the upcoming inauguration of Biden on Jan. 20.

However, Ramani said that while a reduction of the aggression on both sides was possible, the core issues would be harder to resolve.

"Turkey will keep its gas extraction agreement with Libya, which is unacceptable to Greece. The Cyprus dispute is still a point of friction," he added.

Decades-long efforts to establish peace in the divided island are on the verge of collapsing, especially after Ankara began advocating the division of Cyprus into two states in October last year.

The controversies unfolding around maritime rights and hydrocarbon explorations off the island are also adding fuel to the growing tensions in Eastern Mediterranean waters.

Ramani said that the key issue that Turkey-Greece dialogue would resolve, in theory, was the end of Turkish brinkmanship, such as harassment of fishing boats and provocative military drills. "It likely won't solve the core problems," he added.

In December, Turkey withdrew its Oruc Reis seismic research vessel that was

operating in disputed waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, triggering a row with Athens over energy drilling prospects.

The ship will remain within the Turkish continental shelf until June 15 – a move that was seen by some as a goodwill gesture.

The 60th round of talks, the most recent between the two countries, began in Athens in March 2016. The talks continued for years through political consultations, despite having no formal framework.

“Athens’ only pre-condition is that the exploratory discussions should address only the delimitation of maritime zones, based on international law, starting from where they stopped in March 2016. Turkey appears to prefer open-ended discussions. Hopefully, they will converge to an agreed agenda,” Ellinas said.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and Erdogan met EU member-state ambassadors in Ankara on Tuesday, in a move seen by many experts as another attempt to reconcile with the EU and mend ties with Greece. Cavusoglu is also set to travel to Brussels on Jan. 21.



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Turkey, Greece agree to resume talks to resolve disputes Turkey, Greece plan rival exercises in tense east Mediterranean

Israel PM 'driving a wedge between Arab Israelis'

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-13 21:39

AMMAN: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been accused of cynically courting the Arab vote to ensure his own political survival.

Claims that the Israeli leader was exploiting the "good nature" of Arabs were made after he made a surprise visit to Nazareth, the largest Arab town in Israel, on Wednesday.

During the visit Netanyahu greeted Nazareth's mayor, Ali Salam, promising him a safe spot in the Likud's list for the Knesset elections due in late March.

The Israeli leader also promised to increase budget spending and strengthen laws to stem criminal violence causing growing concern among Israel's Palestinian citizens.

Police arrested 10 people after Netanyahu's visit sparked protests in the town.

Wadie Abu Nassar, director of the Haifa-based International Center for Consultations, told Arab News that the Israel leader is a "magician and his latest prize is the Arab community."

He added: "This is the first time in years that Netanyahu needs every vote, including Arabs, because of the challenges he is facing from his opponents. But he is a magician in politics and can never be counted out of any race."

Head of the Joint List Arab alliance, Ayman Odeh, said that the Israeli prime minister imagines that the Arab community has a "short memory."

"The only way to ensure the interests of the Arab community are met is through the unified voice of Arab citizens and their Jewish partners who are fighting with honor and dignity for peace, equality, democracy and social justice."

In a tweet, Odeh also accusing Netanyahu of attempting to drive a wedge between Arab Israelis.

Referring to clashes between police and protesters, he said: "If this is what your reconciliation attempts look like, better to stay home."

During the visit Netanyahu referred to his 2015 quote when he allegedly opposed Arabs voting in Israel with the comment that they are "coming in droves to vote."

“People misunderstood what I meant,” he said. “I didn’t oppose the Arab vote, I only said that they are voting in droves for the Joint List.”

Netanyahu also said that Jews and Arabs are “dancing in the streets of Dubai, so why shouldn’t they be working together in Israel?”

The Israeli prime minister slammed the Joint List for opposing normalization treaties between Israel and four Arab countries.

Botrus Mansour, a Nazareth-based lawyer, told Arab News that the Israeli prime minister is exploiting the good nature of Arabs.

“He is using the agreements he made with Arab countries, and trying to use the fact that Arabs were disappointed with Benny Gantz and the Zionist left, to offer himself as an effective alternative. The Joint List has been splintered and Netanyahu is using that to make inroads.”

In the last elections, the Joint List gained 15 seats, but is expected to gain 10 more seats in the coming poll.



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Netanyahu orders advancement of West Bank settler housing projects

Sultan's eldest son will become Oman's crown prince, new decree says

Wed, 2021-01-13 00:56

DUBAI: Oman's crown prince will be the eldest son of the serving sultan, according to details of a new decree to establish a mechanism for the transfer of power.

Sultan Haitham bin Tariq announced on Monday that Oman would appoint a crown prince for the first time.

The details announced on Tuesday mean his eldest son, Dhi Yazan bin Haitham, is set to become the sultanate's first crown prince.

The decree establishes a basic law defining a "specific and stable mechanism" for selecting a crown prince.

The basic law stipulated that "the mandate of power would be transferred from the sultan to his eldest son, then the eldest son of the latter's son, and so on," said the decree that was published in the official gazette.

The announcement came on the first anniversary of Sultan Haitham's assumption of power, following the death of Sultan Qaboos.

Sultan Qaboos was the founding father of modern Oman and named his successor in a sealed envelope that was opened after his death.

The new decree stipulated that if the mandate of power is transferred to someone under the age of 21, then the powers of the sultan shall be exercised by a guardianship council appointed by the sultan, or by the royal family council.

It also said that if the crown prince dies before the powers are passed on to him, the the title goes to his eldest son, even if he has siblings.

The decree is one of two issued by the sultan. The second established a new law for the parliament – the Council of Oman. It defines the council's capabilities, membership conditions and their rights and duties, as well as regulating everything related to the council's affairs.

These decrees have been issued "to meet the requirements of the sultanate during the next stage, and in line with Oman's Vision 2040," state news agency ONA said.

The same decree also emphasizes the role of the state in guaranteeing more rights and freedoms for citizens, the most important of which are equality between women and men, caring for children, the handicapped and youth, and compulsory education, ONA said.



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Oman to get its first crown prince in constitutional overhaul
Oman raising up to \$2 bln loan with mostly regional banks – sources

[Jordan, Egypt could join Quartet's Mideast peace drive](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-12 23:44

AMMAN: Jordan and Egypt are emerging as potential new members of the international Quartet for Mideast peace after the foreign ministers of both countries joined a meeting of the multilateral forum in Cairo on Monday.

The Quartet consisting of the UN, the EU, the US and Russia was set up in 2002 to help mediate Middle East peace negotiations.

Jordan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki were invited by Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry to attend the meeting, which included French Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, according to a statement by Jordan's Foreign Ministry.

Oraib Rantawi, director of the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, told Arab News that the idea of adding Jordan and Egypt to the Quartet had been discussed by the Obama-Biden administration.

"Although the issue was discussed in the last days of the Obama administration, I don't think that it will be decided until the Biden administration takes over and begins to make its position public," he said.

Rantawi said that Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the UAE also may be invited to participate.

Riyad Mansour, Palestinian ambassador to the UN, welcomed the potential expansion of the Quartet.

"If the nucleus of the international community's approach to resolving the Middle East conflict is the Quartet, we would like to talk about its enlargement," he said.

Mansour said that Egypt and Jordan could be the first additions, with other countries to follow later.

He told the Al-Monitor news website that when the 2007 Middle East peace talks were planned for Annapolis in the US, few countries signed up. "But within a short period of time, everyone wanted to attend. Fifty countries ended up joining the talks."

Ahmad Deek, director-general at the office of the Palestinian foreign minister, told Arab News that Palestinians are hoping for the return of a "sane international order" following the Trump era.

"We are looking forward to a period in which international law and the concept of collective multilateral efforts become the norm again in foreign policy conflict resolution," he said.

Najeeb Qadoumi, a member of the Palestinian National Council, said there is optimism that current efforts will yield positive results.

"There is no doubt that the Palestinian cause will return to the center of attention when Trump is no longer around," Qadoumi said.

"Jordan, which has suffered from the absence of a resolution of the Palestinian conflict and especially the status of refugees, will contribute to any efforts."



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Jordanians voice anger at Mideast peace plan
Proposed UN resolution would reject US Mideast peace plan

[GCC welcomes US designation of Houthis as terrorist organization](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-12 23:09

RIYADH: The GCC on Tuesday welcomed US moves to designate the Houthi militia in Yemen as a terrorist organization.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Sunday that the US planned to blacklist the Iran-backed group this month and place a number of its leaders on terror lists.

The Secretary General of the GCC Nayef Falah Al-Hajraf described the move as "a necessary step that is consistent with the demands of the Yemeni government [which wants] to put an end to violations that these militias carry out against the brotherly people of Yemen."

He said the Houthi's threat to the region was part of the Iranian regime's

agenda.

Al-Hajraf said he hopes the designation puts an end to the “terror acts” of the Houthis and its supporters.

He said it would also help block the supply of ballistic missiles, drones and other weapons that the militia uses to target the Yemeni people, threaten international shipping and neighboring countries.

Saudi Arabia has also welcomed the decision by the US administration.

Gulf countries back Yemen’s internationally recognized government, which was driven from the capital Sanaa in 2014 by Houthi forces. The takeover sparked the conflict which continues today and has devastated the country.



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Saudi cabinet welcomes US plan to designate Yemen’s Houthis a terrorist organization
Yemeni govt welcomes US decision to designate Houthis as terrorist organization