

# Ankara on alert over McGurk's expected appointment to Syria

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-07 22:13

ANKARA: US President-elect Joe Biden is expected to select Brett McGurk, the former envoy to the US-led anti-Daesh international coalition, as National Security Council senior director for Washington's policy in the Middle East and North Africa.

McGurk was appointed to the same post in 2015 by then-President Barack Obama and served until he resigned over the withdrawal of US forces from Syria in December 2018.

His expected appointment carries several messages to Turkey, according to experts, who argue that it could bring a new source of disagreement between Washington and Ankara as McGurk is seen negatively by Turkey's political leaders.

"This would be viewed as a very provocative appointment. A bad start for the Biden era on the US-Turkey relations front if this is realized," tweeted Yusuf Erim, an Ankara-based political analyst.

McGurk is often blamed by the ruling Justice and Development Party as the mastermind behind Washington arming the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in their fight against Daesh, with the YPG considered a terror group by Turkey because of its ties to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party that has waged a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the Ankara office director of German Marshall Fund of the US, it is only natural that Biden will pick several former Obama officials to serve in his government.

"Brett McGurk may be a controversial figure for Turkey, but he is quite mainstream for the Democratic Party and popular in those circles, therefore it will be no big surprise if he gets a senior job within the Biden Administration," he told Arab News.

Unluhisarcikli also noted that McGurk is only one of several former Obama Administration officials who had friction with Turkey and will now become part of the Biden Administration.

"This will be a challenge Turkey will need to live with particularly regarding differences over the YPG," he said.

McGurk also took a tough stance on Turkey's cross-border military operations against the YPG, and criticized Ankara for not effectively managing its border with Syria when foreign fighters were travelling to join Daesh.

As a former supreme court clerk, McGurk also served under President George W.

Bush as a diplomat.

“The Turkish government should not be consumed by its perception of McGurk in judging what approach Biden might have toward Ankara. Biden is not necessarily a third Obama term and McGurk’s role is not typically the forefront diplomatic position,” Joe Macaron, a Middle East analyst at the Arab Center in Washington, told Arab News.

According to Macaron, if the expectation is that the US might withdraw from Syria and end support for the YPG, this expectation should be managed regardless of whether McGurk is serving in Biden’s government.

“The US-Turkish relations might be more tense moving forward, but they have common interests to work together on Syria if Ankara recognizes that Washington will ultimately not sell out the YPG,” he said.

However, pro-government media outlets have already begun their harsh criticisms of the McGurk’s potential appointment.

On Aug. 1, 2017, Turkey’s pro-government Yeni Safak newspaper published a front page that claimed “the coalition forces under the leadership of McGurk are the murderer of 46,000 civilians in Iraq and Syria.” In its coverage on Jan. 7, Yeni Safak has described McGurk as a “colonial governor.”

But Mehmet Emin Cengiz, a research assistant at the Al-Sharq Forum in Istanbul, McGurk’s return would not necessarily make a huge difference.

“Yes, Turkey is not satisfied with this possibility, while the YPG and its political wing are happy about it. However, even without McGurk’s presence, the Syrian Democratic Forces has already received very serious support from the US,” he told Arab News.



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## [Houthi shelling kills 6 in Taiz as UN Yemen envoy visits Aden](#)

Thu, 2021-01-07 22:07

AL-MUKALLA: At least six civilians, including two women and two children, were killed and many more wounded on Wednesday in heavy artillery and cannon shelling by the Houthis in the southern province of Taiz, a local Yemeni official told Arab News.

Col. Abdul Basit Al-Baher, a Yemeni army spokesperson in the southern city of Taiz, said that the Iran-backed Houthis launched a major raid in Taiz's Al-Haima region, east of the province, targeting a military officer loyal to the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

More than 60 military vehicles, artillery weapons and cannons were involved in the raid, Al-Baher said.

"The Houthis shelled the area with heavy weapons that killed and wounded at least 18 civilians and destroyed many houses," the military officer said on Thursday afternoon, adding that Houthi fighters were stationed on high locations where they shelled the area and gunned down residents. "Through my conversations with some residents, we learned that the raid is still going on and the Houthis are determined to humiliate the people."

The targeted officer is said to be a sniper from the Republican Guards who engaged in fighting against the Houthis. During the raid, the Houthis blew up two houses and took several children hostage to force the officer to surrender. Images posted on social media showed heavy smoke billowing from targeted houses and farms as the Houthis heavily shelled the area. The Houthis staged a similar assault on Al-Haima in 2018, looking for the same person.

Also in Taiz, the RASD Coalition for Monitoring the National Dialogue, a Yemeni organization that documents human rights violations during the war, said on Jan. 4 that more than 70 attacks by the Houthis on civilian targets in Taiz from Nov. 1 to Dec. 19 had killed 11 civilians, including six children, and wounded 37 others, including 21 children and four women in different districts in Taiz. Houthi missile and mortar strikes had also

damaged or ruined 25 private and government facilities.

The escalation in attacks by the Houthis comes as the UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths on Thursday landed in the port city of Aden. After touching down in Aden airport, the UN envoy visited parts of Aden airport that were damaged by the missile attack.

On Dec. 30, three guided missiles ripped through Aden airport shortly after the arrival of Yemen's new unity government, killing 27 people and wounding more than 100 and triggering local and international outrage.

The Yemeni government accused the Houthis and Iranian military experts of staging the attack and called for labeling the Houthi movement a terrorist group. Despite his strong condemnations of the attack, Yemeni government officials pushed to convince the UN Yemen envoy to issue a statement shaming and naming the Houthis for attacks on civilians and derailing peace efforts to end the war.

During a meeting with the Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed Awadh bin Mubarak at the presidential palace in Aden on Thursday, the UN Yemen envoy renewed his support for the new government and the strong condemnations of the deadly attack on Aden airport. The foreign minister called for punishing the Houthis for violating international law by targeting a civilian facility, officials told Arab News.

On Wednesday, the Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi told Griffiths that Iran ordered the Houthis to attack Aden airport with missiles to ruin peace efforts, and that the Houthis had never been serious about reaching a peace agreement to end the war in Yemen.



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Houthi militants kidnap Safer. Co engineers, kill civiliansYemeni army spokesman calls Houthis 'most dangerous terrorist group' in the region

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## [Japan welcomes restoration of the relations among the Gulf countries](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-07 01:29

TOKYO: The Japanese government on Jan. 6 welcomed "the restoration" of ties between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and the AlUla declaration adopted at the GCC Summit held in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday, adding that unity among Gulf countries was important to ensure peace and stability in the Middle East.

An official statement issued by the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo hailed

mediation efforts, including by Kuwaiti officials, for the settlement of the issue.

“As Saudi Arabia and Qatar reopened their borders, the government of Japan hopes that the agreement will lead to further improvement of the relations among the countries concerned, as well as to easing tensions and stabilization in the region,” the statement said.

The Japan government pledged to continue working to realize peace and stability in the Middle East in cooperation with the countries in question, it added.



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Saudi crown prince holds meeting with Qatari emir at GCC summit

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# Syria responds to 'Israeli aggression' in south: state media

Thu, 2021-01-07 00:53

DAMASCUS: Syrian air defence forces responded late Wednesday to "Israeli aggression" in the south of the country, state news agency SANA said. The agency reported Sana reported heavy blasts in southern Syria, indicating that "our air defenses have responded to Israeli aggression", without providing further details.



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# Iran's strategy of state piracy menaces Middle East oil lanes

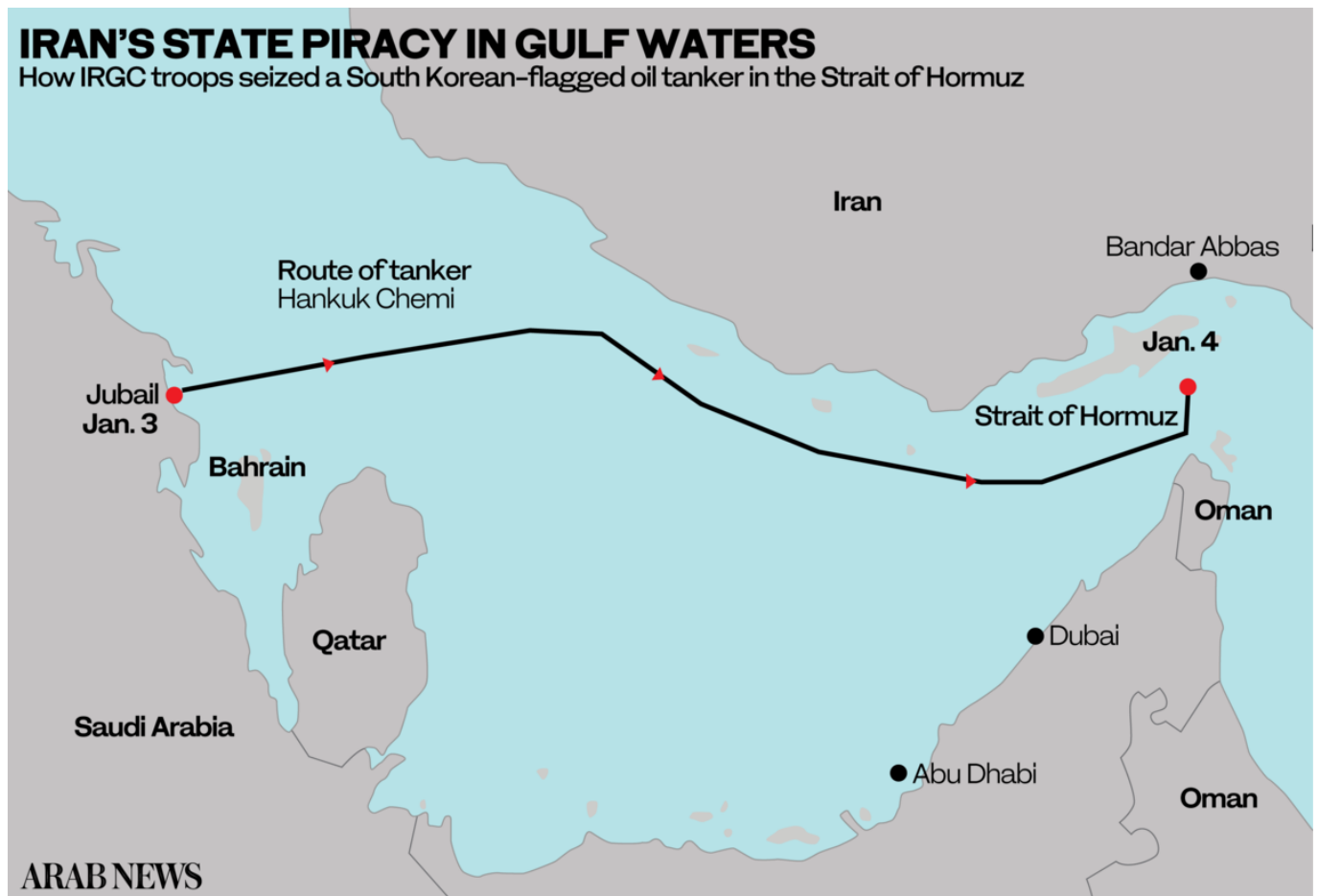
Wed, 2021-01-06 23:53

LONDON: Iran dialed up tensions in the Gulf this week when its troops stormed a South Korean-flagged tanker as it transited through the strategic Strait of Hormuz – a choke point through which a fifth of world oil output passes. The incident is only the latest in a long line of Iranian acts of “state piracy” in the flashpoint region.

The MT Hankuk Chemi was en route from Saudi Arabia’s Jubail to the UAE’s Fujairah on Monday when members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy boarded the vessel and brought it to the port of Bandar Abbas in southern Iran, placing its multinational crew of 20 under arrest.

Iranian authorities alleged the tanker, carrying 7,200 tons of ethanol, was seized for infringing maritime environmental laws – claims the vessel’s owner denies.

Observers suspect the ship was in fact taken hostage as part of an ongoing row with Seoul over \$7 billion in revenue from oil sales that remain frozen in South Korean banks under US sanctions imposed against Iran by the Trump administration.





Although the MT Hankuk Chemi is the first major vessel to be seized by Iran in more than a year, incidents of this kind have become all too common in the Strait of Hormuz and nearby shipping lanes. Several vessels have been boarded or mysteriously attacked since President Donald Trump ramped up his “maximum pressure” campaign, with Iran named as the likely culprit.

The IRGC navy has long used its fleet of speedboats to harass commercial shipping and military vessels in the region, seizing at least six ships in 2019 over alleged fuel smuggling. Iran has also repeatedly threatened to blockade the strait if it is attacked.

Several incidents pre-date the current tensions. In January 2016, the IRGC seized two US Navy riverine command boats after they entered Iranian territorial waters near Iran’s Farsi Island. After a flurry of phone calls between then-US secretary of state John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, the sailors were released unharmed 15 hours later.



Iran’s ambassador to South Korea Saeed Badamchi Shabestari arrives at the Foreign Ministry in Seoul on January 5, 2021, after he was summoned over a South Korean oil tanker being seized by Iran. (AFP/YONHAP)

In March 2007, the IRGC detained 15 British navy personnel from HMS Cornwall as they were searching a merchant vessel off the Iran-Iraq coast. They were released 13 days later. A similar incident occurred in 2004 when six Royal Marines and two Royal Navy sailors were captured by the IRGC in the Shatt al-Arab waterway. They were released three days later.

The Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen has also launched repeated attacks on

ports and ships in recent years, routinely planting marine mines in the southern Red Sea and in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait in the path of commercial shipping.

The militia has repeatedly rebuffed UN pleas to allow an inspection team to enter the FS0 Safer, a 45-year-old oil tanker abandoned off the port of Hodeidah with 1.1 million barrels of crude on board, to conduct urgent repairs. In an extraordinary session, the UN expressed fears on July 15, 2020, of “catastrophe” if the vessel ruptured into the Red Sea.



This CCTV image provided by South Korea’s Taikun Shipping Co. shows the moment a South Korean tanker was captured by an Armed Iranian Revolutionary Guard speedboat, right, on the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz Monday, Jan. 4, 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

In May 2019, Washington deployed the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group and four B-52 bombers to the Middle East, citing unspecified Iranian threats. A matter of days later, on May 12, four commercial ships, including two Saudi Aramco oil tankers, were damaged near the port of Fujairah in the Gulf of Oman in what the UAE called a “sabotage attack.”

On June 13, the oil tankers Front Altair and Kokuka Courageous were also both rocked by explosions, thought to have been caused by limpet mines or flying objects. Days later, on June 20, Iran shot down an American RQ-4A surveillance drone flying over the Strait of Hormuz, raising tensions further.

At the time, US President Donald Trump said Iranian boats harassing the US navy “will be shot out of the water.”

## INNUMBERS

# Iranian Piracy

\* 20 – Civilian sailors aboard South Korean-flagged Hankuk Chemi.

\* \$7bn – Amount claimed by Iran to be in a South Korean bank.

The following month, the IRGC held the British-flagged oil tanker Stena Impero for two months for allegedly ramming a fishing boat. The move was widely seen as an act of retaliation after British Royal Marines detained an Iranian tanker, the Grace 1, in the Strait of Gibraltar on suspicion of violating EU sanctions on Syria.

In the wake of the incident, US Central Command established Operation Sentinel, invited nations to coordinate on surveillance and provide escorts to their flagged commercial vessels in the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Oman.

After European powers voiced qualms about the possibility of being dragged into a war with Iran, the US rebranded Operation Sentinel as the “International Maritime Security Construct” in Sept. 2019, headquartered in Bahrain.

The world’s eyes are once again on Iran as it uses the capture of the Hankuk Chemi to win concessions from South Korea. Seoul has confirmed it is in talks with Tehran and Washington to use the frozen Iranian money to purchase coronavirus vaccines for the country.



This undated picture taken in an unknown location and released on January 5, 2021 by Yonhap news agency in Seoul shows South Korean Navy's destroyer ROKS Choi Young. South Korea will send a government delegation to Iran "at the earliest possible date" to negotiate the release of a seized oil tanker and its crew, Seoul's foreign ministry said on January 5. (AFP/File Photo)

At the same time, South Korea's foreign ministry said it is launching legal action to demand the ship's release. Its defense ministry has also deployed its 300-strong Cheonghae anti-piracy unit to the Strait of Hormuz aboard the destroyer Choi Young to "ensure the safety" of South Korean nationals.

Shin Beom-chul, chief researcher at the Korea Research Institute for Economy and Society, told Arab News that the Iranian move is a desperate bid to get recognition from the incoming Biden administration in the US, which is expected to take a relatively softer stance vis-a-vis Iran.

"Tehran is sending a clear message that it can ratchet up aggression in the region any time, while the issue of frozen money in South Korea is just part of the Trump administration's financial sanctions," Shin said.

Iran is reeling from sanctions reintroduced after the Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal, in May 2018. Iran's economic woes have been compounded by one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in the region.



This handout photo provided by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) official website via SEPAH News on November 19, 2020, shows a military drone parked on a warship named after slain Naval commander Abdollah Roudaki, sailing through the waters in the Gulf during its inauguration. (AFP/File Photo)

European powers, meanwhile, are scrambling to salvage the JCPOA, just as Iran announced on Monday it has stepped up its uranium enrichment to 20 percent purity – far beyond the limits set by the deal.

Tehran's successive breaches of the nuclear deal are widely interpreted as a means of pressuring European signatories to provide sanctions relief – a move that Washington has branded “nuclear extortion.”

Also fresh in Tehran's mind this week is the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the IRGC's extraterritorial Quds Force commander, who was eliminated with a US drone strike near Baghdad airport one year ago.

Struggling with sanctions and COVID-19, and bruised by strategic setbacks, Iran appeared to rein in its extra-legal naval activities in 2020. But now the IRGC seems to be reasserting itself in the waning days of the Trump administration.

With little sign of de-escalation in the Gulf, the Hankuk Chemi may not be the last commercial ship to be targeted by Iran in 2021.

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South Korea prepares legal action against Iran over oil tanker seizure  
South Korea to send delegation to Iran to secure release of seized ship