

Top US officials discuss 'range of options' to protect Americans in Iraq from Iran attacks

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:13

WASHINGTON: Top US national security officials agreed on Wednesday on a proposed range of options to present to President Donald Trump aimed at deterring any attack on US military or diplomatic personnel in Iraq, a senior administration official told Reuters.

The meeting was spurred by an attack on Dec. 20. At least eight rockets landed in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone in an attack targeting the US Embassy, causing some minor damage, the Iraqi military and the embassy said on Sunday.

The official said the so-called principals committee group of officials, including acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security adviser Robert O'Brien, discussed the situation at the White House.

They agreed on a "range of options" that will be presented soon to Trump, the official said. The official would not describe the content of the options or say whether they included military options.

"Each one is designed to be non-escalatory and to deter further attack," the official said.

The Iraqi military blamed the Dec. 20 attack on an "outlaw group."

But US officials blame Iran-backed militia for regular rocket attacks on US facilities in Iraq, including near the embassy in Baghdad. No known Iran-backed groups have claimed responsibility.

The senior administration official said the aim of the White House meeting was "to develop the right set of options that we could present to the president to make sure that we deter the Iranians and Shia militias in Iraq from conducting attacks on our personnel."

An array of militia groups announced in October that they had suspended rocket attacks on US forces on condition that Iraq's government present a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops.

But a rocket strike on the US Embassy on Nov. 18 was a clear sign that Iranian-backed militias had decided to resume attacks on US bases, according to Iraqi security officials.

Washington, which is slowly reducing its 5,000 troops in Iraq, threatened to shut its embassy unless the Iraqi government reins in Iran-aligned militias.



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US blasts Iran-backed militias over Iraq rockets 'Cheaper than water': Iraqis angry but unsurprised over Blackwater pardons

[Egypt's president sends message of support to Libyan leaders](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 21:51

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has reiterated his rejection of foreign interference in Libya and support for efforts to find a comprehensive solution to the country's security, political, and economic crises.

His comments came in a message, delivered by the head of the Egyptian committee on Libyan affairs, to the leaders of south Libya meeting in Cairo

to discuss ways of unifying the parliament, and forming an executive authority and constitutional path.

On Tuesday, members of a 75-strong delegation from southern Libya began talks with committee representatives just hours after arriving in the Egyptian capital for a three-day visit during which meetings will take place with sovereign bodies in Egypt and El-Sisi.

On the first day of discussions, the Libyan delegation stressed the need to strengthen Egypt's role and contributions toward restoring security, peace, and stability in all cities of Libya, while also preserving the country's unity and helping solve the difficult situation in the southern region.

The trip comes as part of Egypt's efforts to communicate with all Libyan parties, with the aim of converging views, uniting the Libyan ranks, deterring extremist militias and countering their attempts to control the government, and supporting international moves to reach a political settlement to the Libyan crisis.

During its visit, the Libyan delegation will present to the Egyptians its vision for resolving the crisis and overcoming obstacles to unification, especially in relation to the country's legislative body, achieving consensus on a mechanism for choosing the next executive authority, and agreeing appropriate constitutional arrangements to allow elections to take place.



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[NGOs call for reform to Turkey's presidential system](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-22 22:35

ANKARA: Turkey's highly contentious executive presidential system is again under the spotlight following a new report released by the Checks and Balances Network, a prestigious umbrella organization gathering 294 non-governmental organizations.

Turkey's presidential system was launched in July 2018, sparking widespread debate because of the powers it put in the president's hands, diminishing the role of the parliament, leading to the erosion of judiciary oversight and undermining civil society's ability to monitor public projects.

The report asserts that this system has led to a hyper-centralization of the country's decision-making process because the president is not constrained by any supreme body or constitutional breaks.

The Checks and Balances Network has recommended reforms by separating the head of state from the party chair. It also suggested efficient parliamentary auditing over the government and president.

With the new system, presidential decrees – which are generally signed overnight – are excluded from the parliament review, while unanswered parliamentary questions to the vice-president and ministers have become common.

In the 27th term of the parliament, a total of 21,504 parliamentary questions have been submitted, but 11,663 of them have been unanswered. Only 1,700 parliamentary questions were answered in time.

“The principle of the separation of powers has been obstructed in favor of the executive power. The system now permits the president to hold the joint offices of the head of state, head of government and head of the ruling party. This situation has pushed Turkey to a hyper-presidential system,” said the report.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sued opposition

Republican People's Party (CHP) Group Deputy Chairman Ozgur Ozel for emotional damages after he called him a "dictator." Ozel recently resembled Erdogan to Spanish dictator Francesco Franco as Erdogan referred to the main opposition as a "fifth column."

The new report comes soon after the publication of a study about polarization in Turkey conducted by the Istanbul Bilgi University and German Marshall Fund, which found that 90 percent of CHP supporters and 77 percent of supporters from the Peoples' Democratic Party think the executive presidential system is bad for the country's future.

Rights activists have reacted to these reports by emphasizing the negative repercussions of the presidential system over freedoms and rights.

"Before the presidential system came into force, the pledge was to enlarge the area of rights and freedoms and convey reform agendas that enhance capacity of inclusive institutions and democracy which already deteriorated in the state of emergency period," Hayriye Atas, general director of Checks and Balances Network, told Arab News.

However, since 2018, Turkish NGOs have seen a serious backsliding in their operational environment. In 2020, the activities of the civil society – including their meetings – have been curtailed due to pandemic rules.

Due to a new law, NGOs are now obliged to notify the names of their members to the government – which many fear will deter joining civil society organizations over concerns that they could be monitored.

"It can be noticed when we follow detentions and arrests of activists and human rights defenders so far. In addition, there is still a lack of an inclusive legislative framework that regulates civil society. All amendments and legislations relating to civil society pass through omnibus bills swiftly that don't allow for consensus or participation of related actors in the legislation process," Atas said.

The report notes that, while executive power and its control area has enhanced, the efficiency of parliament and the rule of law has decreased dramatically, with executive intervention in civil society area becoming obvious.

"If this process continues, the movement area of civil society is constricted and democracy efforts of the country will regress in the long run," Atas said.

Turkey's opposition parties and NGOs are concerned by a draft bill by the government that could eliminate civil society activities in the country by allowing the Interior Ministry to replace their boards and suspend activities.

According to Atas, the parliament lost nearly all of its leverage over the decision-making process.

"The main phenomenon behind the presidential system is the strict separation

of power among the judiciary, executive and parliament. In this system, the parliament should be especially empowered and efficient to monitor government, the rule-making power mainly belongs to the parliament, but the presidential system is run in favor of executive power through omnibus bills, presidential decrees, weak parliamentary commissions," she said.

Hakan Yavuzyilmaz, a policy analyst, said one of the prevalent features of Turkish politics has been the presence of severe political polarization that becomes a facilitating factor for the democratic backsliding in the country.

"Following the transition to a presidential system, the political and social polarization did not diminish. Under such a prevalent polarization, it is hard to conclude that Turkish citizens are becoming apolitical. Nevertheless, we are also seeing a growing number of undecided voters," he told Arab News.

"Such a voter detachment shows a warning signal for the stability of the party system. Time will tell whether existing political parties can successfully re-mobilize this electorate within the grey zone," he added.



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Human rights experts fear controversial bill will curb Turkish civil society
Europe's top human rights court orders immediate Turkish release of jailed Kurdish leader Demirtas

Human rights experts fear controversial bill will curb Turkish civil society

Tue, 2020-12-22 22:13

ANKARA: Human rights activists in Turkey have warned that upcoming legislation will further restrict the limited space being allocated to civil society in the country.

A draft law that is expected to be rushed through the parliament this week has sparked concerns about the underlying motives of the government to put a strain on the country's fragile civil society actors.

The bill has been proposed to counter the financing of weapon proliferation, with Turkey at risk of being placed on the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) "gray list" due to insufficient measures against financial crimes.

However, the law also includes controversial articles allowing the government to appoint trustees to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and to temporarily suspend their activities and assets if members of those groups face a terror-related investigation.

The Turkish branches of international NGOs are also included in the contested legislation.

Controversial "terror" charges have become a tool of Turkish rulers to continue their severe crackdown on dissidents, including mayors in Kurdish-led municipalities, ex-chairs of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) or members of left-wing associations.

Several municipalities run by the HDP in the country are now governed by government-appointed trustees.

With the new bill, the organizations' fundraising activities will also be monitored by the Interior Ministry.

"The government has introduced a lot of irrelevant items in the draft bill. These provisions can be used randomly against the associations, which would result in the closure of all democratic channels," Engin Altay, the CHP's deputy parliamentary head, said on Dec. 21.

Experts underline that the bill aims to suffocate Turkey's once-vibrant civil society by creating a climate of fear with Big Brother-type surveillance methods.

Ozturk Turkdogan, president of Turkey's Human Rights Association, said this

new bill would put all civil society actors under the tutelage of the Interior Ministry with routine monitoring of their activities.

“If there is an element of crime, it is possible to launch a criminal investigation against the activities of associations. But, making this as a regular initiative of the state authorities would interfere into the internal affairs of civil society organizations,” he told Arab News.

Turkdogan added that this intervention into freedom of association goes against the international norms Turkey should abide by.

“If it is legislated and if it is not vetoed by the president, we will resort all relevant legislation to the jurisdiction, and we will make sure that this overt intervention into our civil sphere becomes visible on the international platforms,” he said.

Recently, the Solidarity Network for Human Rights Defenders, a network of 22 human rights organizations in Turkey, complained that NGOs in Turkey are still under government pressure, with their free operational space being constrained due to coronavirus restrictions.

NGOs are not allowed to hold their general assemblies until Feb. 28, and all outdoor protests have been banned throughout the year. Several doctors have been arrested and investigated after criticizing the government’s handling of the pandemic.

CHP lawmaker Utku Cakirozer said that the bill will likely undermine civil society in the country.

“It is against the constitution, it will render NGOs working on human rights dysfunctional. If it is adopted, it will lead to more conflict between domestic law and international norms,” he said.

There are about 121,000 registered associations in Turkey, while the hundreds of NGOs were permanently closed and their assets seized following the 2016 failed coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency.

The bill is expected to be adopted in the Turkish parliament this week.



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Europe's top human rights court orders immediate Turkish release of jailed Kurdish leader Demirtas
Survey reveals alienation of Kurdish youth in Turkey

[Egypt denies reports of bird flu outbreak](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-22 21:30

CAIRO: The Egyptian government has denied reports of a bird flu outbreak in the southwestern Al-Wadi Al-Gedid Governorate.

The General Authority for Veterinary Services rejected claims on some media websites that the isolated province has been hit by the outbreak.

Egypt's Ministry of Agriculture urged media outlets and social media users to seek accuracy in news publishing and to contact the authorities before publishing.

The bird flu (commonly known as H5N1) strain spread in the early 2000s in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East, resulting in the slaughter of tens of millions of chickens and ducks.

World Health Organization (WHO) officials said that many people were infected and several died.

Egypt suffered a major outbreak of bird flu in 2006, which led to the suspension of all poultry exports.

Authorities have been pressing for a renewal of exports and, earlier this year, the World Organization for Animal Health, an intergovernmental body, declared Egypt free of bird flu for the first time in 14 years.

Infections with bird flu and other forms of zoonotic influenza in humans may cause illnesses ranging from mild conjunctivitis to pneumonia, but can also be life threatening, according to the WHO.



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Turkish town shutdown after bird flu outbreak
Bird flu outbreak prompts Saudi Arabia to ban poultry imports from the Netherlands