

US criticism of religious freedom in Turkey stirs debate

Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

1605289822508340200

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ANKARA: A US statement saying that its Secretary of State Mike Pompeo plans to “promote our strong stance on religious freedom” during his visit to Istanbul next week has drawn the ire of Ankara.

Pompeo’s visit is part of his planned tour of seven nations, including countries in the Middle East and the Gulf. During his time in Istanbul on Monday and Tuesday, the top diplomat is scheduled to meet the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I, but no Turkish officials.

Turkey’s Foreign Ministry criticized the US statement “as extremely inappropriate.”

“It would be more advisable for the United States to look in the mirror first and to show the necessary sensitivity to human rights violations such as racism, Islamophobia and hate crimes in its own country,” the ministry said in its own statement.

Pompeo is expected to run for the senate, and support from the Greek Orthodox community and evangelicals would be a boost to his hopes of election in Kansas.

“Religious freedom, more specifically issues facing Christians around the world, is a shared concern among many Republicans – especially influential evangelical and diaspora communities,” Ziya Meral, senior associate fellow at RUSI (Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies), told Arab News.

The tension surrounding Pompeo’s visit is just the tip of the iceberg, however. The incoming administration of US president-elect Joe Biden, who will assume office in less than three months, will also pressure Ankara over religious freedom in Turkey – an issue that has been in the spotlight recently following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s decision to convert Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia into a mosque in July, which drew accusations that he was attempting to erase the cultural heritage of Orthodox Christians in the city. Turkey is also under increasing pressure to reopen the Greek Orthodox theological school shut down in 1971.

Biden is expected to be a staunch supporter of religious freedom globally, including the rights of Greek Orthodox followers. Under former President Barack Obama, Biden became the only sitting vice president to visit the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which he did twice.

Turkey drew further criticism late in October when it opened the former monastery of Christ the Savior in Chora, an ancient Christian basilica, for Islamic prayer services, compromising the building’s architectural and historical value. That decision was taken following a presidential decree claiming that the use of the building as a museum was illegal.

According to Meral, there is non-partisan anger at Turkey over a long list of

issues from the reconversion of Hagia Sophia to the prolonged detainment of an American pastor and the termination of residency permits for foreign Christian church workers living in Turkey.

“Geopolitical issues from Greece to Armenia to northeastern Syria have now melted into the usual narratives of ‘us versus Islamists,’ which continues to politicize the issue of religious freedom beyond the actual concerns of religious minorities,” Meral said.

While Meral expects the Biden administration to continue to raise these issues with Turkey, he said it “won’t pursue a similar agenda on religious-freedom issues abroad (to the one) we saw Trump and Pompeo pursuing.”

In June, the US Department of State published its 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom. It criticized Turkey for limiting the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities, especially Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians.

“The government continued to restrict efforts of minority religious groups to train their clergy,” the report also noted.

Dr. Mine Yildirim, head of the Freedom of Belief Initiative and the Eurasia Civil Society Program at the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, said Turkey’s long-standing key challenges in the area of freedom of religion or belief require fundamental changes.

“Some of the central legal issues include the lack of legal personality of religious or belief communities, the status of places of worship, and the glaring inequality related to the public funding of the Presidency of Religious Affairs and those individuals and communities that do not receive services from this institution,” she told Arab News.

“Most of these issues have been the subject of judgments from the European Court of Human Rights. However, those judgments have not been effectively implemented. All states can hold each other accountable on account of their ratifications of international human rights instruments,” Yildirim added. Experts underline that religious freedom is and will remain a foreign-policy priority for the US under the Biden administration.

Yildirim believes that, while multilateral initiatives are important, states should focus more on strengthening international human rights control mechanisms in order to contribute to the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

Anna Maria Beylunioglu Atli, a lecturer at MEF University in Istanbul, meanwhile, suggested that external pressure from the West can only go so far, and that real domestic change will only happen if there is a shift in mindset among policy makers in Ankara.

“Otherwise, we will only see cosmetic changes in religious freedom,” she told Arab News. “There has been serious regression in this area since 2013, and there has been no significant improvement so far.”



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Iran and Turkey 'losers' in emerging new Middle East order, say analysts
British woman left fighting for life after 'nightmare' cosmetic surgery in Turkey

[Lebanon's Basecamp sets the pace for citizens' initiatives in fragile states](#)

Fri, 2020-11-13 20:37

BEIRUT: Volunteers from across Lebanon have flocked to support Basecamp, an initiative offering everything from food deliveries to garbage collection, from home repairs to mental health support.

Under the slogan "Together, we're stronger; we are the real government," Basecamp unites Embrace (Lebanon's national mental health hotline), housing

project Baytna Baytak, social justice movement Minteshreen and citizens' organization Muwatin Lebne.

"We came up with the idea of providing alternative housing for medical heroes and Red Cross members who were in touch with COVID-19 patients," said Bouchra Boustany of Baytna Baytak.

"It was launched among people who met during the revolution (in Oct. 2019), and we organized alternative housing for 450 people."

Following the Aug. 4 Beirut port explosion, the hotlines reopened and members hit the streets once again to assist those affected.



Under the slogan "Together, we're stronger; we are the real government," Basecamp unites several of Lebanon's volunteer services. (Supplied)

"The phone started ringing, and I realized people didn't want to leave their houses because they were mainly elderly, and most of them have been here for ages," Boustany said. "We are now (providing) alternative housing to around 20 percent of applicants, and 80 percent are only asking for house repairs."

So far, Baytna Baytak has rehabilitated 225 homes, with 127 in progress and another 132 waiting on finance. "We have a double mission because COVID-19 is growing, so now we are receiving calls from medical heroes. Our aim is to reach 1,000 houses within Beirut alone," Boustany said.

And reaching those who are living alone is a high priority. "Those people are really in pain, if not physically, then psychologically. They're destroyed. What I am doing is part of a therapy – we just can't let them down, and it's a struggle because we don't have any kind of hope that anything is going to be ok."

Samer Makarem, a strategist at Minteshreen, describes the movement as a

national response. "We saw a lot happening and people trying to do things on their own. We decided that the country really needs unity, with everyone pooling their talents. We had a food box initiative before the explosion, so we were very active on a social front."

FASTFACT

Basecamp

The initiative coordinates the voluntary services of Embrace, Baytna Baytak, Minteshreen and Muwatin Lebne.

Minteshreen's intention is to form a political body to drive real political change, which Makarem says the country desperately needs. Following the blast, the organization worked on mapping operations across Beirut to dispatch the right people to the right places.

"It was very difficult to see your neighbors and compatriots being reduced to waiting in line for food boxes," Makarem said. "None of us is trained in relief and emergency; we're just citizens who love our country, and it felt like the right thing to do."

"The trauma and emotional stress are there, and it's pretty bleak to be in, unfortunately, but Basecamp was a beautiful experience."



Muwatin Lebnene is another organization formed during the revolution to collect and recycle garbage, subsequently turning into a productive civic duty movement.

“When the blast took place, we also felt that we needed to be on the ground,” said Muwatin Lebnene member Peter Mouracade. “(By the second day after the explosion), hundreds of selfless volunteers were there to help as much as

they could, but it was messy and chaotic.”

Basecamp was created to enable proper utilization of all resources and to coordinate activities, including the mapping of Beirut’s neighborhoods.



So far, Baytna Baytak has rehabilitated 225 homes, with 127 in progress and another 132 waiting on finance. (Supplied)

“We had access to 3,000 households and made sure we had all the data verified within the blast radius,” said Mouracade, who is also the managing director of the Toters delivery app and former CEO of the Beirut Marathon. “We also ensured we could recycle broken glass – we sorted close to 80 tonnes (88 US tons) of glass and provided shelter to those who no longer had a roof over their head.”

Basecamp has moved to a larger indoor facility in Gemmayze to provide an integrated solution. “We now have a huge warehouse, a medical center, an engineers’ station also dedicated to heritage preservation, and psychological relief on site (to dispatch where necessary),” Mouracade said.

“We helped rebuild close to 500 houses and provided food to 2,000 households. This is growing on a daily basis with the help of civil society, NGOs, the Lebanese diaspora and internationals who have been helping us.”

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Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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How the port explosion rubbed raw Beirut's psychological scars
In blast-hit Beirut, 'invisible' elderly women face destitution

['In our hearts': Radio keeps Syria refugees in Iraq close to home](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-11-13 00:44

ARBAT, Iraq: Speaking into a microphone in her modest studio, Sherin Mohammad goes live with the news. But this is no typical radio station: Gardenya FM is run by, and for, Syrian refugees.

Broadcast from the refugee camp of Arbat in northeast Iraq, Gardenya FM

features news programs and talk shows, produced by a team far from their native Syria.

Nearly 500 km away from her home town of Qamishli, Sherin concludes her news roundup, waits for the catchy jingle to end and sets down her clunky headphones on a white wooden desk.

The 31-year-old fled Qamishli in 2014 so she could stay with her husband, desperate to avoid the military conscription imposed by the Syrian government.

Their painful displacement came with a silver lining: She could realize her lifelong dream of being a journalist.

"I wanted to be a reporter back in Syria but it wasn't on offer at my local university, so I became a teacher," she told AFP.

In 2018, Italian NGO UPP proposed setting up a local radio station in Arbat, and Sherin jumped at the opportunity.

She has dedicated herself since then to providing reliable information to fellow refugees on the Syrian conflict, which erupted in 2011 with protests against the regime Bashar Assad.

The war has profoundly divided communities both inside and outside Syria, with various sides trading accusations of fabricating news.

Sherin wants to be the antidote.

"Everyone has smartphones and they can read any old thing published about Syria," she said, including "fake news spread by the regime."

Gardenya broadcasts locally at 101.3 FM, but the team also posts on the station's Facebook page, which has several thousand likes.

Through it, Sherin said, loved ones still in Syria could see what life is like for Arbat's 9,056 residents, many of whom sensed their displacement would be long-term and began replacing tarp tents with cinderblock structures in 2017.

"We want to give real information to those still in our homeland through our Facebook page so that people see we don't live in tents," she added.

Strolling through these one-room cement homes with a bounce in his step is Khalil, another Gardenya FM reporter.

He is well-known: Fellow refugees greeted him warmly, and someone handed him a flatbread with thyme for breakfast. Youssef, a 19-year-old trainee, trailed behind.

"This is how you build a network," Khalil explained to him.

"We use our friends, our relatives, our journalist colleagues who are in the country and those on the front" to gather information, said Khalil.

But for the former English teacher from Amuda in northeast Syria, the most interesting people to speak to are the Syrian Kurds who travel back and forth between their homeland and safe haven in Arbat.

One of them, Goran, was Gardenya FM's latest interview subject.

Covered in flour after a long morning making flatbreads to sell in the camp, Goran answers Khalil's questions, then has a few of his own: Is the border still open? Could he travel back to check on his wife, still stuck in their Syrian home town?

"With Covid-19, we have little information. The radio can tell us every day what's going on," Goran said.

Although Goran misses his family, he said he couldn't imagine trying to live in Syria again.

"Why move back? There's no electricity, no salary, the US dollar is so

expensive,” he said.

“At least here, there’s work,” he told AFP from his cinderblock bakery. According to the International Organization for Migration, there are 230,000 Syrian refugees living in northern Iraq, 40 percent of them in camps, with the rest in rented homes or other housing arrangements. Officially, none have permanently returned to Syria.

The Syrian regime is hosting a summit on Wednesday and Thursday to encourage returns, with 5.5 million Syrians still seeking refuge outside their homeland. But infrastructure and public services are lacking across the war-ravaged country and rights defenders warn that some areas are still unsafe for large-scale repatriations.

“Syria remains in our hearts,” said Khalil.

“Building (Arbat) with our own means is our way of saying that we can rebuild a Syria without Assad,” he added.

“That’s what the radio is for, too.”



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German woman charged over crimes against humanity in Syria
Lebanon holds 'productive' sea border talks with Israel, joins conference on Syrian refugees

UN warns of 'ecological disaster' in Houthi-controlled Red Sea area

Thu, 2020-11-12 22:23

LONDON: UN human rights experts have demanded access to an abandoned oil tanker off the coast of Yemen that say poses a risk of causing an "ecological catastrophe" in the Red Sea.

The tanker, FSO Safer, lies in waters controlled by the Iran-backed Houthis near the port of Hodeidah, where it currently holds an estimated 1.1 million barrels of oil.

The ship, launched in 1976, is decaying rapidly after being abandoned in 2015 when its engine room flooded with seawater.

Both the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthis agreed to grant access to the vessel to independent experts in 2018, formally requesting the UN's assistance.

Since then, however, relevant permits from local authorities in the Houthi-controlled area have not been granted.

"It is vital that a UN technical team be permitted to board the FSO Safer if we are to have any hope of preventing the threat of a spill that could be four times worse than the historic Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska in 1989," said Marcos Orellana, UN special rapporteur on toxics and human rights.

"Has the world learned nothing from the devastating explosion at the port of Beirut in Lebanon in August? Surely the dangers of mishandling hazardous substances are now evident," he added.

"If this ship were to break up, a spill could decimate livelihoods of local coastal communities, biodiversity in the region, and heavily impact shipping routes in the Red Sea," he said.

"A UN technical team should be given all necessary means to assess the dilapidated tanker and conclusively avert the threat of a spill from the dilapidated tanker."

David Boyd, special rapporteur for human rights and environment, said: "An oil spill would harm the rights to life, health and a healthy environment for some 1.6 million Yemenis."

He added: "This is a tragedy in the making and it must be prevented at all costs from hitting the people of Yemen. They have suffered enough."



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Saudi Arabia warns UN of oil in Red Sea near abandoned tanker
Yemen minister: UN failed to convince Houthis to allow access to decaying oil tanker

[Iran and Turkey 'losers' in emerging new Middle East order, say analysts](#)

Fri, 2020-11-13 00:02

DUBAI: Turkey and Iran are the big “losers” of the normalization of relations between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel, but the treaties signed by the three countries are not directed against any third party, according to participants in the just concluded Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate.

A key takeaway from three days of discussions was that the Abraham Accords are about solving the Arab-Israeli conflict and approaching it in a strategic and realistic way, while creating momentum for peace in the entire Middle East.

Organized by the Emirates Policy Centre, the seventh edition of the annual debate featured virtual panel discussions in which strategic experts, researchers and policy-makers participated from all over the world.

Taking part in a debate on Wednesday entitled “Middle East between Political Rationality and Delusions,” Khalifa Shaheen Al-Marar, UAE assistant minister for political affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, put it this way: “The Abraham Accords represent a massive and ongoing project; the more we get tangible results from the agreement, the more we incentivize finding peaceful solutions to ongoing conflicts.”

He added: “To build on the success and momentum of the accords, we need renewed efforts in finding a solution for the Palestinian peace process based on a two-state solution.”



Palestinian youths lift portraits of late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat during a rally by Fatah supporters to mark the 16th anniversary of his death, in the West Bank city of Ramallah on November 11, 2020. (AFP)

Two experts who took part in a separate panel discussion on Wednesday entitled “Decoding the Region in the Aftermath of the Treaty” called for more dialogue among the signatories to the Abraham Accords and other Middle East countries with a view to begin de-escalation of regional tensions.

“I see Iran as a loser in the sense of losing out geopolitically, ideologically and politically at home,” said Alex Vatanka, senior fellow and director of the Iran program at The Middle East Institute.

“Geopolitically, the Iranian regime is now concerned with what Israeli

presence in the Gulf will mean for Iran's security. Ideologically, the axis of resistance is on the defensive. It is clear that the armed struggle option against Israel has not worked and perhaps it is time to try a different approach. Domestically this is an embarrassment for Iran in the eyes of Iranians."

He said Iran now will have to come up with policy solutions and, more importantly, engage in introspection. "The question mark is still out there as to how much Israel and the Gulf will cooperate militarily and in intelligence, which will shape Iran's actions going forward," he said.

"Iran has made a giant mistake for the last 42 years by believing that it can come to terms with the Gulf states by going through Washington, and it is a false premise that's not going to work. The axis of resistance is on the defensive, which puts pressure on Iran."

According to Vatanka, should the Abraham Accords end up creating tangible new ways of cooperation involving Israel and the Gulf, it would make life harder for the ideological message that Iran has been promoting for the last 42 years. "This is an embarrassment for Iran and a failure on their part," he said.



Members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) take part in a demonstration against American "crimes" in Tehran on January 3, 2020 following the killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Major General Qasem Soleimani in a US strike on his convoy at Baghdad international airport. (AFP/File Photo)

“Iranian foreign policy has invited massive sanctions on the country and put the entire regime at risk. Iranians are going to come out on the streets and everything the Islamic Republic stands for will now be challenged, unlike any time you have seen it before. That is a real risk for the regime.”

Turkey too finds itself on the wrong side of the new Middle East order following the normalization of ties by Israel with the UAE and Bahrain, according to the other panel participant. Omar Taspinar, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seeking to create the perception of a Turkey that is strong in the region, in the eyes of the Muslim Brotherhood and hundreds of millions of Muslims.

He said the Abraham Accord confirms the sense of isolation that Turkey is feeling in the region, because Israel was an ally of Turkey not too long ago. “Now Turkey is increasingly perceived as an Islamist country,” Taspinar said. “This plays a role in the sense of anger, resentment and victimhood of Turkey. And Erdogan will use this victimhood to turn it to his advantage by stating that he is one of the few (remaining) allies of the Palestinian cause.”

Taspinar said Erdogan is playing the game along the lines of Turkey being one of the few countries that is able to challenge the dynamic in the region that is going towards the legitimization of Israel. “There is irony in this, because you can ask what has Turkey done for the Palestinians? This is more perception than reality, (but) Erdogan is in the business of creating perceptions,” he said.

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Taspinar believes “politically, Erdogan is determined to send the message that he is a supporter of the Palestinian cause as an additional step in his populist messages to the world and his domestic base.”

With President Donald Trump’s projected defeat in the US elections, Turkey is “the biggest loser,” Taspinar said, adding that a sense of panic had settled in Ankara today with regard to a Biden administration because it will not be interested in a reset without Turkey abiding by certain norms, including becoming a loyal NATO ally and figuring out a new path for relations in Syria.

“The US under (President Biden) will have a lot of leverage economically against Erdogan, and the economy is where Erdogan is the most vulnerable because Turkey does not have oil nor natural gas. It is totally dependent (economically),” Taspinar said. “The Turkish economy and the lira are now in free fall, and without the economy doing well, Erdogan might lose the

election.”

However, Taspinar does not foresee Erdogan calibrating his “pro-Islamist” foreign policy because of the worsening economic situation in Turkey. “As the economy worsens, Turkey will look at opportunities in the Middle East to wave the flag of political Islam to distract attention from the mismanagement of the economy at home,” he said.



A battleship of Turkish Naval Forces, which took part in the Blue Homeland 2019 Drill, passes Bosphorus in Istanbul, Turkey on March 09, 2019. (AFP/File Photo)

For his part, Vatanka said success stories will need to be attached to the UAE-Bahrain-Israel accord, and one of them is to bring the Palestinians into the conversation as soon as possible. “They cannot be left out in the cold,” he said. “If the Palestinians accept the new realities on the ground, it will make life a lot more difficult for Turkey and Iran to use the Palestinian issue for their own political purpose.”

He said it was vital for the sake of the UAE, Gulf stability and Israel neither to undo the accord any time soon, nor to become a staging ground for operations against Iran, as this may force the Iranians to retaliate. “If Iran chooses to go in the direction of trying to broaden the conversation in its foreign policy, that could be the beginning,” Vatanka said.

“If Iran decides it will take the option of saving the nuclear deal and broadening the conversation, which could happen in six months, then the US will then be accepted by Iran as a player in the region. You have to have the Gulf states at the table; this is something that Washington and Tehran have

to accept if for real sustainable de-escalation in the region.”

Vatanka said the election of Biden could have been the perfect opportunity for Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to shift in a new direction and blame the deteriorating relationship with the US on Trump. “Instead he has called the entire US government corrupt and criticized the elections. This is an indication that he is still thinking small and not willing to change the overall position of being a revolutionary militant Islamist state,” he said.

Twitter: [@CelineMalek](#)



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