

Turkey deploys troops against Kurdish rebels in Iraq

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ANKARA: Turkey launched an air and ground offensive against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq on Wednesday, in a move likely to increase friction with the Baghdad government.

The defense ministry said "commandos" moved in, supported by drones and helicopters, following a bombardment with rocket launchers and artillery guns that hit more than 150 targets.

It said the operation, dubbed "Claw-Tiger," came after a "recent upsurge in attacks on our police stations and military bases" near the Iraqi border. Turkey carried out air strikes earlier this week that drew an angry response from Iraq, which labelled them "a violation of sovereignty."

The Turkish military regularly carries out operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in southeast Turkey and its rear bases across the border.

The operation on Sunday night was dubbed "Claw-Eagle" with raids in the northern Iraqi territories of Kandil, Sinjar and Hakurk.

A PKK source in northern Iraq told AFP Turkish forces "carried out a commandos airdrop from military helicopters backed by warplanes, and clashed with our fighters" in an area called Haftanin, which is in Dohuk province near the Iraqi-Turkish border.

Reda Manujri, an independent analyst in northern Iraq, said Turkish troops would likely seek to occupy a "strategic mountain chain" along the border between Iraq and Turkey, possibly even setting up military bases there. The expert said the "silence" from the Kurdish regional government and Baghdad "indicates that they both had information from, an understanding with, and perhaps even collusion with the Turkish government on this attack." PKK bases are not explicitly authorized but are tolerated by an autonomous Kurdish administration in northern Iraq.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party spokesman defended Turkey's actions.

"Turkey continues its effective fight against terror using its rights based on international law," Omer Celik said on Twitter.

"It is our most natural right and duty to fight against terrorists who attack our borders, citizens and security forces."

The PKK, which has fought an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, is banned as a terrorist group by Ankara and its Western allies.

Tens of thousands have been killed during the violence, which resumed after a two-year cease-fire collapsed in 2015.

Iraq summoned Turkey's Baghdad envoy Fatih Yildiz over the raids on Sunday night.

The ambassador tweeted he had informed Iraqi officials that Turkey would

“fight the PKK wherever it is” if Iraq did not “take any steps” to remove the PKK’s presence.



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[Caesar Act sends Syria's Bashar Assad a tough reality check](#)

Tue, 2020-06-16 22:36

NEW YORK CITY: It all began in 2014, when a Syrian military police photographer, codenamed “Caesar,” testified in disguise before the US Congress. He provided the back stories for some of the 55,000 images of torture victims that he had helped to smuggle out of Syria.

The trove of photographs testified to a campaign of human rights violations, torture and murder by the government of President Bashar Assad.

The stage was thus set for the drawing up of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which did not pass until late last year as part of a Defense

Spending bill.

FASTFACT

Caesar

Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act is named after “Caesar,” a Syrian military forensic photographer who documented torture by Assad’s regime.

The legislation warns Washington’s friends and foes alike, worldwide institutions, businesses and officials that engage in any business with the government of Assad could be subject to travel bans, denied access to capital, and arrest.

“Any country or individual, if you’re supporting Assad, stop now! If you’re thinking of supporting Assad in the future, cancel your plans! Because the Caesar bill is an open-ended warning to every one (who deals with Assad),” said Mouaz Moustafa, the executive director of Syrian Emergency Task Force, dubbed “Caesar’s Godfather.” He brought Caesar to testify in Congress, and then coordinated efforts to help in the drafting, passing and now implementation of the bill.

The legislation received rare bipartisan support. Top Republicans and Democrats from the congressional foreign affairs committees urged all nations to shun Assad, who “remains a pariah,” and called on the Trump administration to vigorously enforce the new measures.

“The regime and its sponsors must stop the slaughter of innocent people and provide the Syrian people a path toward reconciliation, stability and freedom,” said Representatives Eliot Engel and Mike McCaul and Senators Jim Risch and Bob Menendez.

“(Assad) will never regain standing as a legitimate leader,” added the joint statement.



A Syrian military defector using the pseudonym Caesar, while also wearing a hood to protect his identity, testifies about the war in Syria during a Senate Foreign Relations committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, March 11, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

While Assad appeared to be emerging victorious from the civil war and talk had turned to reconstruction, a spiraling economy is now threatening his grip on power.

“The Assad regime understands what most of the world doesn’t about the reality on the ground (where it) can detain and torture to death, displace or murder by airstrikes or chemical weapons,” said Moustafa.

“The world will just watch and make statements of condemnation. And the only

solution that we have seen actually progressing over the last nine years is the military solution: that of the Assad regime and the Russian air force and Iran and Hezbollah and other terrorists.

“The Assad regime is counting that they’ll just kill, displace, and detain until he occupies all of Syria. And he thinks when he does that, he can claim victory, and then the world somehow is going to welcome him back.



A Syrian military defector using the pseudonym Caesar, while also wearing a hood to protect his identity, testifies about the war in Syria during a Senate Foreign Relations committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, March 11, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

“The Caesar Act pulls away that military victory from the Assad regime. It says that no matter what, any place that the Assad regime rules and governs cannot be worked with or dealt with or ever integrated into the international community, because Assad belongs in the International Criminal Court, not in the United Nations.”

Sanctions from the era of President Barack Obama already target the oil sector, and powerful Syrian individuals. The Caesar Act closes loopholes in these sanctions by adding secondary sanctions that target entities operating for the Assad regime’s benefit in four sectors: Oil/natural gas, military aircraft, construction and engineering.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

This includes indirect support to the regime, such as support to Iranian- and Russian-backed militias operating in Syria.

“This revision alone in the bill is worth the whole legislation, because (it) ensures that (individuals) who have been sanctioned in the past and have found creative ways, loopholes, to be able to (get around) the sanctions will now see secondary sanctions placed on them, meaning any company or individual that wants to have any relationship with these sanctioned individuals, will also have sanctions applied to them,” said Moustafa.



A displaced Syrian woman and her daughter walk through a street, ravaged by pro-regime forces air strikes, in the town of Ariha in the southern countryside of the Idlib province on April 5, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

The bill’s backers want to stymie reconstruction because Assad is offering lucrative investment contracts to countries to re-establish diplomatic relationships with them.

“The regime is hijacking the private sector. They say they want

reconstruction but what they really mean is they want to do another round of stealing the resources of Syria,” said Nizar Zakka, a Lebanese citizen who is a member of the Caesar Act team.

Zakka, now global ambassador for peace and director for Program Development Peacetech Lab at the US Institute of Peace, endured torture in Iranian prisons for four years, and was asked to join the team as a voice for the victims of torture.

Moustafa says reconstruction deals also serve another purpose: Demographic change and what amounts to ethnic cleansing that the regime, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah have conducted inside Syria.



Children play in front of a building, destroyed by pro-regime forces air strikes, in the town of Ariha in the southern countryside of the Idlib province on April 11, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

“When a regime levels whole towns, destroys infrastructure, targets hospitals and displaces well over 10 million people, and then is asking for investments so people can pay for him to rebuild what he destroyed, land that he’s expropriated from millions of refugees that will never be allowed to return – the Caesar Act puts an end to that,” he said.

Syria’s economy has collapsed after a decade of war. Hyperinflation and a currency nosedive have raised the cost of food and medicine beyond the reach of most citizens and resulted in mass business closures and widespread food shortages.

The economic downslide is made worse by the financial crisis in neighboring Lebanon, where banks have served as a conduit to the world for Syria’s business community.

The Syrian government called the sanctions “economic terrorism,” and said the US will “bear main responsibility for the suffering of the Syrian people.”



A handout picture released by the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) on MAY 4, 2020 shows Syrian President Bashar Assad meeting with members of the government team tasked with handling the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. (AFP/HO/SANA)

Critics of the legislation claim it is being used for US strategy, which aims to crush two of the regime’s main backers, Iran and Hezbollah, and could push Syria and the region to the brink of a dangerous new stage of the conflict.

Moustafa dismisses those accusations as mere conspiracy theories.

“First of all, the United States and the international community (should) be ashamed of themselves for allowing that never-again moment in Syria to go on for so many years with the worst sadistic types of crimes happening.

“The Caesar act is the reaction of Republicans and Democrats in the US

Congress. It's the reaction of regular American people that saw photographs they have (only seen the likes of) in history books about the Holocaust or the Rwandan (genocide.)



People wave Syrian national flags and pictures of President Bashar Assad during a demonstration in support of Assad and against US sanctions on the country, at the Umayyad Square in the centre of the capital Damascus on June 11, 2020. (AFP)

The bill "is meant to do exactly what the letter of the law says: Protect civilians and punish the criminals.

"It's the very least the US can do, but it is a very positive step meant to fix the many mistakes of the previous administration and this administration and anyone that hasn't done enough to help Syria," Moustafa said.

The Caesar Act establishes criteria that Assad and his allies must meet before sanctions can be lifted.



People wave Syrian national flags and pictures of President Bashar Assad as they gather for a demonstration in support of Assad and against US sanctions on the country, at the Umayyad Square in the centre of the capital Damascus on June 11, 2020. (AFP)

They include halting the Syrian-Russia air campaign and its targeting of civilians; allowing unfettered humanitarian access to areas under regime, Russian or Iranian control; releasing thousands of political prisoners, facilitating the return of refugees; a genuine political process leading to some form of power sharing; constitutional reform; and ensuring that war criminals are held accountable.

The first group of sanctions will be revealed on Wednesday. More will be gradually unveiled over the summer.

“This is to give those who are dealing or thinking of dealing with Assad the time and option to stop. It is a delicate process. If you immediately put sanctions on people, you are going to lose them to the other side. That is in no one’s interest right now,” said Zakka.

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Rami Makhoul vs. Bashar Assad: Rift within Syria's ruling family?

[Yemen repatriates more nationals from Jordan, Egypt](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-06-16 14:40

DUBAI: Yemen repatriated over 300 stranded nationals from Jordan and Egypt amid coronavirus travel restrictions, state news agency Saba New reported. The plane from Egypt with 174 Yemenis onboard landed in Seiyun Airport in Hadramout, and all arrivals had to undergo coronavirus PCR tests. The other flight, which helped return 147 citizens from Jordan, arrived in

Aden's airport.

The report said Yemen's government continues to work with stranded citizens to help repatriate them back home.



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[Arab League says Turkey is copying Iranian interference in Arab world](#)

Tue, 2020-06-16 16:43

LONDON: Turkey was condemned for its violations in Libya and urged to stop its interference in the region's conflicts by the assistant secretary-general of the Arab League on Tuesday.

Citing Turkish action in Libya, Hossam Zaki compared Turkey's behavior with the destabilizing role Iran plays in the Middle East, saying: "Turkey and Iran do not respect the principles of good neighborliness with the Arab countries, and are stoking the fire of discord," telling Egypt's news agency that Turkish and Iranian interference in Arab affairs must stop.

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He also said Turkish interference in Syria and Iraq and its recruiting of foreign fighters and terrorists to fight in Libya soil were "unacceptable" to Arabs.

The official said Turkey's agreement with the Libyan government covertly aims to achieve economic, political and military gains, adding that Tehran and Ankara are supporting militias in the region to serve their agendas.



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Arab League slams Iran for interference in regional issues
Arab League slams Israel's West Bank annexation plans 'a new war crime'

UN calls for investigation in Libya into fate of Egyptian detainees

Tue, 2020-06-16 15:46

CAIRO: The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) said on Tuesday it was concerned about the arrest, detention and ill-treatment of a large number of Egyptian nationals in the city of Tarhouna. The body said this was “in potential violation to Libya’s international human rights law obligations on the prohibition of torture, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment.”

UNSMIL is concerned about the arrest, detention & ill-treatment of a large number of Egyptian nationals in the city of Tarhouna in potential violation to Libya’s international human rights law obligations on the prohibition of torture, inhuman & degrading treatment or punishment. pic.twitter.com/jyojScZGem

– UNSMIL (@UNSMILibya) [June 16, 2020](#)

Egypt said Monday it will take a firm stand after a video emerged of Egyptian workers being abused by militias loyal to Libya’s Government of National Accord (GNA).

UNSMIL welcomed a statement released by the GNA’s interior ministry denouncing the video.

“On this issue and called on the local authorities in Tripoli to conduct a prompt investigation, to uncover their fate and whereabouts and to ensure their treatment in accordance with international standards.”

The video has sparked anger in Egypt and led to calls for the government to take further action.

Egypt’s Parliament Speaker Ali Abdel-Aal and immigration minister Nabila Makram promised to take a stand when the time was right, according to Egyptian media.

On Sunday, a spokesman for the Libyan National Army, which is fighting against the GNA’s forces, said the mistreatment of the Egyptians was carried out by Turkey-backed militias.

Ahmed Al-Mesmary said the workers were innocent and not linked to the conflict playing out in the country.

Earlier this month, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi oversaw an

agreement that aimed to end the conflict in Libya.



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UN says dozen migrants feared drowned in capsizing off Libya
Conflict, division blight virus response in Libya