

# Erdogan denies blackmail over Syria migrants

Author:

Thu, 2020-03-05 01:02

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan laid his cards on the table on Wednesday and demanded EU help for his military action in Syria in return for ending the migrant crisis on Turkey's border with Greece.

Thousands of refugees have massed at the border and around the Greek islands since Erdogan last week tore up a 2016 deal with the EU to keep the migrants in Turkey in return for cash aid to help with the influx from northwest Syria. Clashes have broken out between police and refugees.

Erdogan said Europe had to support Turkey's "political and humanitarian solutions in Syria" if it wanted to resolve the situation, but government spokesman Ibrahim Kalin denied this was blackmail.

"Our objective by opening the doors was not to create an artificial crisis, to place political pressure or to serve our interests," he said, but Turkey's capacity "has a limit."

Turkey already hosts more than 3.6 million refugees, most of them Syrians, and has been fighting the Assad regime in a bid to prevent more crossing from Idlib province.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and European Council president Charles Michel met Erdogan in Ankara on Wednesday, and pledged an additional 170 million euros in aid for vulnerable groups in Syria.

But Turkish spokesman Kalin urged the EU to produce a "road map" for the management of the funds.

Borrell said the EU recognized the "difficult situation Turkey is facing" but Turkey's green light to migrants could "only make the situation worse."



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Turkey's migrant policy turns into a hot potato for Europe  
Greek navy ship on Lesbos houses latest island migrants

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## [‘I fear for the whole country,’ says senior Lebanon politician Walid Jumblatt](#)

Thu, 2020-03-05 00:50

PARIS: Druze leader Walid Jumblatt has told Arab News that if Lebanon wants to deal with Hezbollah's weapons issue, the Iran-backed political party cum Shiite militia will try to change the Taif Agreement and write a new constitution that works in its favor.

In an exclusive interview, the veteran politician added that it was necessary for Lebanon to work on a program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on acceptable conditions.

He denied that the new Lebanese government was a Hezbollah-sponsored one, and said he believed that a government in place was better than a political vacuum.

During a brief visit to Paris, Jumblatt, who is president of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), expressed fears about a US-Iran rift over Lebanon.

He said he would still call for dialogue with the Free Patriotic Movement party – led by President Michel Aoun’s son-in-law Gebran Bassil – for the sake of Christian-Druze coexistence.

According to Jumblatt, Lebanon’s political governing system as envisaged in the 1989 Taif agreement – which ended the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war – can only be changed by a new electoral law.

French radio reports of the current situation in Lebanon suggest that 800 Lebanese businesses, such as hotels, bars and restaurants, have closed, and that 100,000 employees have been laid off during the political crisis, with people unable to withdraw money from banks.

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## **BIO**

**Name:** Walid Jumblatt

**Born :** August 7, 1949

**Party:** Progressive Socialist Party

**Family:** Son of Kamal Jumblatt, leader of Lebanon’s Druze community until his assassination in 1977

**Political base:** Moukhtara, in Lebanon’s Chouf Mountains

**Government experience:** Served as cabinet minister in the 1980s

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Jumblatt spoke about the circumstances that had brought about the crisis, and who, in his view, was responsible for it.

“It is partly the responsibility of the political class and partly the mismanagement of public affairs in Lebanon,” he said.

“We were living in a dream when each time we had a crisis, there was an appeal to the international community and millions of dollars poured in.

“We have passed through many international aid conferences – Paris 1, Paris 2, Paris 3, and also Arab assistance. This is no longer working. We have to reschedule the Lebanese debt and work with an IMF program on acceptable

conditions.

“Maybe we have to ask the IMF to manage our affairs, such as electricity and other public utilities, because it seems that the political class and the actual administration are unable to do what is needed.”

Jumblatt was asked about the Lebanese popular uprising, its rejection of the political class and whether he felt he was part of it, and responsible for the long-running problems.

“I was part of it, but the people are blaming everybody, even though they cannot accuse everybody. I am a minority because of our system. There is also the fact that Lebanon is in a unique position: We have a Lebanese state and another parallel entity which is Hezbollah.”

Jumblatt added: “We have to reach an understanding with Hezbollah on a minimum (number) of issues.



Lebanese anti- government protesters flash the victory sign next to a burning roadblock during a demonstration in the capital Beirut in January. (AFP)

“That means controlling the borders, fighting corruption together and, for the time being, leaving aside the issue of Hezbollah’s weapons – because we cannot discuss this question now and see the future of Lebanon.”

Jumblatt said it was clear that there were “conflicting views” between Hezbollah and the PSP.

"The main issue has been weapons but nobody nowadays – neither us nor the revolutionaries – is bringing up the subject of Hezbollah's weapons," he said.

"The main conflict of views is over the control of our borders, both the official and non-official ones. Hezbollah has financial autonomy but most Lebanese citizens lack this autonomy."

Given the likelihood of Hezbollah rejecting the planned IMF program, Jumblatt said: "Most Lebanese rely on the banking system and we have to find a solution, a compromise. The IMF is not a danger to Hezbollah."

Jumblatt added: "Unless Hezbollah have another solution, can they afford to sustain the whole Lebanese people and provide them with welfare and medical care?"

On the anti-corruption and anti-nepotism demonstrations in the streets of Lebanon, Jumblatt said: "We want a new political class, but that will not happen except through elections."

"I have failed because we have been in a war for decades. Now it is up to them. This confessional system is very strong (but) it has to be changed."

But can the existing political system really be changed? "I don't know; it is up to the people," Jumblatt said.

"Changing the system cannot come except through a new electoral law, but up to now, the revolution has not formulated what it wants. It wants the downfall of the political class but no means of achieving that has materialized."

Asked if he fears for the safety of Lebanon's Druze due to his complicated relationship with two powerful Iran-backed entities, the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, Jumblatt replied: "I fear for the whole country and not only for the Druze. Of course, I have opponents backed by the Syrians and the Iranians but that is a minor problem."





Walid Jumblatt has warned that dealing with Hezbollah's weapons "issue" would lead to the Shiite group trying to change the Taif Agreement and rewrite the constitution. (AFP)

"I fear for the whole country when its elite go to foreign embassies to flee from Lebanon because they have no future in their own country."

"I fear a conflict between the US and Iran on Lebanese soil. The whole country is on the verge of total collapse."

Against this backdrop, Jumblatt is worried that the victory of hardliners in Iran's recent elections will result in a tightening of Tehran's grip on Beirut.

Lebanon's new government is described by its opponents as "one color" because it is backed by President Michel Aoun and his allies – including Hezbollah – and does not include Western-supported parties.

Jumblatt rejects this characterization. "I don't share the point of view that it is a government sponsored by Hezbollah," he said.

"We have excellent ministers. I was supporting the government indirectly because I was against having a void. From the start of the revolution on Oct. 17 until Saad Hariri's resignation, we had a total void. A government is better than a void.

"Also, the people in the government are doing their best in this terribly difficult situation."

In his opinion, "somebody has to take us out of this economic mess and find a formula for formally dealing with the IMF on acceptable conditions. In addition, we have to pay part of the due eurobonds or reschedule them."

Quizzed about Lebanon's government failure to condemn the suspected Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil facilities in September, Jumblatt replied: "I condemned it. I was not foreign minister. Lebanon is unfortunately divided."

Asked whether he had plans to visit GCC countries, Jumblatt said: "I have received no invitation. I have good relations with both the Saudis and Kuwaitis."

As for his forthcoming visit to Russia, he has no doubt about its timeliness. "I have always had good relations with the Russians. Relations were excellent when they were the Soviet Union," he said.

"It is absolutely necessary to go there now because the Russians are a very important power in the Middle East."

Jumblatt ended the interview on a wistful note, saying: "On Sept. 20 this year, the Lebanese will celebrate the hundredth anniversary of 'Greater Lebanon.'

"I wonder what it means to celebrate that when Lebanon is totally isolated, is no longer protected by a compromise involving the West, the East and the Arab world, and a so-called economic miracle has totally collapsed.

"It is time for change."





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Calls for creation of new UN anti-corruption body for Lebanon  
Hezbollah says it opposes IMF management of Lebanon crisis



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# Turkey's migrant policy turns into a hot potato for Europe

Author:

AFP

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Wed, 2020-03-04 20:38

ANKARA: Amid an unprecedented migration crisis along the Turkish-Greek border, the international community is searching for ways to quickly de-escalate the situation.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to open the floodgates to the flow of migrants from the Middle East into mainland Europe, violating the 2016 Turkey-EU deal, has pushed more than 136,000 refugees to leave for Europe, according to Turkish statistics.

The EU decided to provide Greece with up to €700 million (\$780 million) to manage migration flow to its borders – the external borders of Europe – which has now turned into a frontline with heightened clashes between asylum-seekers and Greek police.

Along with boosted sea and land border controls, Athens suspended asylum rules for a month by invoking article 78.1 of the EU treaty. The presidents of the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament also traveled on Tuesday to the Greek-Turkish land border as a sign of support for Athens.

On Sunday, a child migrant drowned during a dangerous sea crossing to the Greek island of Lesbos.

Turkey currently hosts 4.1 million refugees, including 3.7 million Syrians. There are also about 1 million civilians at the Syrian border with Turkey who left Idlib after the advance of the Russian-backed Syrian forces.

A northern town of Turkey has offered free bus services for desperate migrants trying to make a journey to the Greek border, covering hundreds of kilometers.

"The gates are open" narrative and the free busses to Edirne have produced consternation and disbelief across the EU, and are seen as the first government-organized humanitarian crisis. "It makes further dialogue more difficult," Marc Pierini, a former EU ambassador to Turkey who is now at the Carnegie Europe think tank, told Arab News.

Ankara has criticized Brussels for not keeping its promises under the refugee deal – to provide financial aid fairly quickly, lift visa requirements for

Turkish citizens by the end of 2016, upgrade the Customs Union, and accelerate Turkey's stalled accession process to the EU in exchange for dealing with migrant management within Turkish borders.

Only 25,000 refugees have been resettled in European countries in the past three years, although Brussels committed to a large-scale resettlement. Of the €6 billion that was promised to Turkey, only 53 percent (€3.2 billion) has been disbursed.

EuroMed Rights President Wadih Al-Asmar said: "Refugees are not a bargaining chip to be played with at the whims of political leaders. Europeans cannot look away from what might become one of the worst humanitarian disasters the war in Syria has brought on its people. Respecting international humanitarian law as well as the human right to protection and refuge remain the sole possible answer in the face of such indiscriminate violence."

After Turkish forces suffered heavy military losses in Syria's rebel-held stronghold Idlib, Ankara opted for an increasingly aggressive regional policy. Meanwhile, polls in Turkey reveal that almost 60 percent of the population holds anti-Syrian sentiments.

The mutual suspicion between Ankara and Brussels has encouraged Erdogan to weaponize the Syrian migrant situation.

Research fellow Luigi Scazzieri, from the Center of European Reform (CER), thinks Ankara's "opening of the gates" has been seen in Europe as a move to blackmail the EU, with leaders saying that they will fully support Greece in controlling its border.

"European leaders have a very negative image of Turkey at the moment and do not fully appreciate its role in hosting refugees over the past few years. But leaders also know they need to cooperate with Turkey if they want to avoid mass pushbacks at the border," he told Arab News.

How Germany's Angela Merkel's efforts to ease the humanitarian crisis will play out not only on Ankara's side but also on Europe's far-right populist parties is still unclear.

Germany recently announced that it is ready to deal with the issue with Ankara, which is aggressively asking for more help from Europe after its regional partnership with Russia in Syria backfired.

"After we opened the doors, there were several calls saying 'Close the doors'," Erdogan said on Monday.

"I told them it's done. It's over. The doors are now wide open. Since we have opened the gates, the number of refugees heading toward Europe has reached hundreds of thousands. This number will soon reach millions."

Ahead of the EU's extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council in Zagreb on March 5-6, EU's High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell and Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarcic visited Ankara on Tuesday and Wednesday to hold consultations on migration management.

This time, Ankara can also ask Europe for more money for the possible reconstruction of a Turkish-controlled buffer zone in Northern Syria.

“A cross-border humanitarian operation for Syrian internally displaced people (IDPs) in Idlib province is entirely dependent on a cease-fire agreement between Turkey and Russia, and security guarantees agreed by Russia and Damascus and their enforcement,” Pierini said.

“Once this is agreed, the EU should contribute to an UN-led humanitarian operation,” he said.

However, for expert Scazzieri, it will be difficult for the EU to assist with reconstruction or humanitarian assistance in Idlib until there is some sort of diplomatic agreement between Russia and Turkey to wind down the fighting in Syria.

“But the EU can provide Turkey with more assistance in supporting the refugees it is currently hosting. I think it is quite likely that leaders will begin talks with Turkey over how to extend and potentially increase EU funding. But they will be careful to avoid the impression that they are simply giving in to Ankara’s demands,” he said.



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Greek navy ship on Lesbos houses latest island migrants  
Refugee aid groups attacked as tensions rock Greek island

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## [Amnesty says Iran killed two dozen children in November crackdown](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-03-04 01:49

PARIS: Human rights group Amnesty International on Wednesday accused the Iranian security forces of killing 23 children, mostly with live ammunition, during a November crackdown on anti-government protests.

Protests broke out across Iran from November 15 after the announcement of a surprise petrol price rise. The authorities responded with a crackdown that Amnesty has already said left 304 people dead, a figure vehemently disputed by Tehran.

Amnesty said in its new report it had evidence that at least 23 children were killed, with 22 of them killed by the security forces “unlawfully firing live ammunition at unarmed protesters and bystanders.”

The children killed included 22 boys, aged between 12 and 17, and a girl reportedly aged between eight and 12.

“There must be independent and impartial investigations into these killings, and those suspected of ordering and carrying them out must be prosecuted in fair trials,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty’s research and advocacy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Twelve of the 23 deaths – recorded in 13 cities in six provinces across the country – took place on 16 November, a further eight on 17 November, and three on 18 November, according to Amnesty.

“The fact that the vast majority of the children’s deaths took place over just two days is further evidence that Iranian security forces went on a killing spree to quash dissent at any cost,” said Luther.

Amnesty International said it had written to Iran’s Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli with the names of the 23 children recorded as killed but had received no response.

It said relatives of some of the children killed described being subjected to harassment and intimidation, including surveillance and interrogations by intelligence and security officials.

It said this corresponded with a broad pattern of families of those killed in protests being intimidated by the state to prevent them talking openly about the deaths.

“Families of children killed during the protests are facing a ruthless campaign of harassment to intimidate them from speaking out,” said Luther, denouncing a “state cover-up.”

Its report was based on evidence from videos and photographs, as well as

death and burial certificates, accounts from eyewitnesses and victims' relatives as well as information gathered from human rights activists and journalists.

In one child's case, there were conflicting reports on the cause of death, with one source referring to fatal head injuries sustained by beatings by security forces and another referring to the firing of metal pellets at the victim's face from a close distance, it said.



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## [Concerts, sports events in UAE canceled, put off as virus spreads](#)

Wed, 2020-03-04 00:45

DUBAI, TEHRAN: Major concerts and events in the UAE, an air transit center as well as a tourism and business hub, have been canceled or postponed as the coronavirus spreads in the Gulf.

There have been at least 1,641 cases of the virus in the Gulf region, mostly in Iran where 66 people have died. Cases have also been reported in other Middle East nations.

The March 5-6 electronic music Ultra festival at Abu Dhabi's 25,000-capacity Du arena and the March 21 K-pop concert Music Bank at Dubai's 17,000-capacity Coca-Cola Arena have been canceled.

Organizers of Ultra, where electronic group Major Lazer and DJ Afrojack were to perform, cited travel restrictions imposed by some countries and airlines due to the rapidly spreading virus.

South Korea's national broadcaster KBS and crowdfunding platform Makestar, organizers of the K-pop concert, said Music Bank was canceled because of the spread of the epidemic in South Korea and elsewhere.



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# FLIGHTS CANCELED

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- American Airlines has extended the suspension of China and Hong Kong flights through April 24.
- Air France said on Feb. 6 it would suspend flights to and from mainland China for much of March.
- Air India has suspended flights to Shanghai, Hong Kong.
- Air Seoul has suspended China flights from Jan. 28.
- Air Mauritius has suspended all flights to China and Hong Kong.
- British Airways has suspended extended its flight suspension until April 17.
- Delta Airlines flights have been suspended from Feb. 2-April 30.
- Egyptair suspended flights on Feb. 1, but on Feb. 20 said it would resume some flights to China.
- El Al Israel Airlines has extended its suspension of flights to Hong Kong and Beijing until May 2.
- Iberia Airlines has extended its suspension of flights from Madrid to Shanghai, its only route, from Feb. 29 until the end of April.
- Kenya Airways has suspended flights from Jan. 31 until further notice.
- KLM said on March. 2 it would extend its ban on flights to Chengdu, Hangzhou and Xiamen in China to May 3.
- Lion Air has suspended flights for all of February.
- LOT has extended flight suspensions until March 28.
- Lufthansa has extended China flight cancellations until April 24.
- Oman Air suspended flights on Feb. 2 until further notice.
- Qatar Airways has suspended services from Feb. 1.
- Saudia, Saudi Arabia's state airline, suspended flights on Feb. 2.
- Scoot, Singapore Airlines' low-cost carrier, suspended services from Feb. 8 until further notice.
- United Airlines suspended its service to Hong Kong from Feb. 8-April 23.
- Vietjet and Vietnam Airlines suspended flights to the mainland.

Dubai's flagship international art fair "Art Dubai," which was scheduled to be held from March 25-28, has also been postponed, organizers said. The UAE, which has reported 21 cases of coronavirus, regularly hosts major conferences, concerts and sporting events, a significant draw-card for foreign visitors.

The UAE central bank will reassess its forecast for economic growth in 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak, an official said on Tuesday. A women's forum

and yoga festival in Abu Dhabi and a carnival in Dubai for the Hindu holi festival, all in March, have also been canceled or rescheduled. American rapper and producer Russ said his March 27 concert in Dubai will now take place in November because of the virus. "I know, wild lol (laugh out loud) but outta my control," he said on Twitter. Dubai has postponed its March boat show until November and Abu Dhabi postponed the ITU World Triathlon event this month, after earlier canceling a cycling event in which two riders were diagnosed with the virus. Meanwhile, the Middle East's largest airline, Emirates, said it had to reduce or ground flights due to the new virus. Because of the slowdown, the government-owned carrier has asked its employees to take paid and even unpaid leave for up to a month at a time. Emirates' operates out of Dubai, the world's busiest for international travel.

## **HIGHLIGHT**

**Experts worry Iran's percentage of deaths to infections, now around 3.3%, is much higher than other countries, suggesting the number of infections in Iran may be far greater than current figures show.**

Qatar has canceled a defense exhibition and Bahrain has postponed two oil and gas conferences that had been scheduled to take place this month.

The March 16-18 Doha International Maritime Defense Exhibition and Conference (Dimdex) was scheduled to take place at the city's exhibition center DECC. Doha has recorded a new case of coronavirus, a Qatari national who was among a group evacuated from Iran on Feb. 27. This brings the number of infections in Qatar to eight.

Iran's supreme leader has put the country on war footing against the coronavirus, known as COVID-19, by ordering its armed forces to assist health officials in combating the outbreak – the deadliest outside of China – that authorities say has killed 77 people.

Experts worry Iran's percentage of deaths to infections, now around 3.3%, is much higher than other countries, suggesting the number of infections in Iran may be far greater than current figures show.

Iran stands alone in how the virus has affected its government, even compared to hard-hit China, the epicenter of the outbreak.

The death of Expediency Council member Mohammad Mirmohammadi on Monday makes him the highest-ranking official within Iran's leadership to be killed by the virus. State media referred to him as a confidant of Khamenei.

The virus earlier killed Hadi Khosroshahi, Iran's former ambassador to the Vatican, as well as a recently elected member of parliament.

Those sick include Vice President Masoumeh Ebtekar, better known as "Sister Mary," the English-speaking spokeswoman for the students who seized the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and sparked the 444-day hostage crisis, state media reported. Also sick is Iraj Harirchi, the head of an Iranian government task force on the coronavirus who tried to downplay the virus before falling ill. On Tuesday, lawmaker Abdolreza Mesri told Iranian state television's Young Journalists Club program that 23 members of parliament had the coronavirus.

He urged all lawmakers to avoid the public.

“These people have a close relationship with the people and they carry different viruses from different parts of the country, which may create a new virus, so we recommend the lawmakers to cut off their relationship with the public for now,” Mesri said.

An activist group also said that Wikipedia’s Farsi-language website appeared to be disrupted in Iran after a close confidant to the supreme leader died of the new coronavirus.



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Iran virus deaths now 77 as emergency services chief infectedUK to withdraw embassy staff as Iran coronavirus death toll risesLIVE: Middle East coronavirus alert continues with major events canceled, global cases riseSaudi Arabia sets up 1,400 respiratory isolation rooms to halt contagion