

# Turkey to warn Russia over Idlib attacks

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-27 01:32

ANKARA: Turkey will warn Russian President Vladimir Putin that escalating fighting in Syria's Idlib province could threaten the country with a flood of Syrian refugees.

Escalating fighting in the nearby province is likely to be a major focal point of talks between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Putin during the Russian leader's visit to Turkey on Jan. 8.

Erdogan last week warned Europe that Turkey cannot handle a new wave of Syrian refugees fleeing increased bombardment in Idlib. The country already has more than 3.7 million registered Syrian refugees.

More than 80,000 Syrians have fled toward the Turkish border in the past week following a Syrian regime offensive backed by Russian airpower in the Maaret Al-Numan region.

Turkey's leader told Europe to prepare for a "new wave" of Syrian refugees, saying his country "will not carry the migration burden alone."

The Syrian offensive is part of Bashar Assad's strategy to secure the M4 and M5 highways running through Idlib, both key routes connecting the government-controlled cities of Aleppo and Hama with the rest of the country.

"Idlib is the last stronghold of the rebels and extremists, all opponents of the Assad regime," Sinan Hatahet, an Istanbul-based Syrian analyst, told Arab News.

"For the stability and survival of the Syrian regime, it is important Assad completely destroys it," he added. The province is already home to about 3 million people, including many displaced from other parts of Syria.

Hatahet warned that rebels linked with Al-Qaeda could pose a risk of future insurgency in the province. He said that from a Russian perspective, the humanitarian crisis in Idlib offers the Kremlin leverage in its negotiations with Ankara, Brussels and Washington.

Turkey has backed Syrian rebels fighting to oust Assad, while Moscow and Tehran support the regime. A senior Turkish delegation traveled to Moscow on Dec. 23 to discuss the escalating fighting in Syria.

Turkey recently reinforced 12 military observation posts along the border of Idlib following attacks that resulted in the death and injury of its soldiers.

The observation points were established following a September 2018 deal

between Russia and Turkey aimed at preventing a regime assault against the rebels. However, the Damascus regime continued its bombardment despite the cease-fire agreement.

## **FASTFACT**

Last Saturday, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on allowing cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria.

“Turkish observation points do not have a tactical and functional presence anymore because their original objective – observing any regime breach of the cease-fire – failed. It is only a matter of time before Turkey withdraws these posts,” Hatahet said.

Syrian regime forces surrounded a Turkish observation post in Al-Surman on Monday, but there were no clashes.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, said that the Russian military escalation in Idlib shows Moscow is determined to achieve its goals.

Saban said that the latest attacks by the regime and Russia are targeting civilians and some rebel groups while ignoring the presence of Al-Qaeda-linked extremists.

“What happens now is an initial attack for an upcoming operation in Syria,” he told Arab News. “There are different scenarios, but the most likely one is that the Russians will take control of the M4 and M5 highways, and won’t care about the rest of the area.”

Last Saturday, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on allowing cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria.

The resolution would have extended for one year all cross-border UN-funded aid distributions from Turkey and Iraq to millions of Syrian civilians, especially those in Idlib region and other opposition-held areas of Syria.



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## [Palestine govt, Christians slam Israel for insufficient action on church attack](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-12-26 23:48

AMMAN: The Palestinian government and church leaders condemned the Israeli police's handling of an incident on Tuesday – Christmas Day – when a young Jewish man armed with a knife entered the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

A spokesman for the Israeli police, Miki Rosenfeld, told Arab News that the incident was not dangerous and that the man was released without charge after questioning.

"An individual approached the area. He was spotted by the police when he walked into the church. The police removed him and asked him what he was doing, and it became clear from his replies and his behavior that this was an unstable man," Rosenfeld said. "After he was questioned, he was released."

Rosenfeld refused to name the man, claiming: "People don't have the right to know his name because he was not arrested." Asked if Israeli police would extend the same right of anonymity to Palestinians in similar circumstances, he declined to comment.

Hanna Issa, head of the Islamic Christian Committee for Jerusalem, told Arab News that the police's actions were insufficient and would cause concern among local Christians and tourists.

"If the attacker committed a crime he should be sent to jail," Issa said. "If he was mentally ill, he should be sent to a mental hospital. But in either case, he should not (have been) released."

The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying that the perpetrator was released 30 minutes after the incident.

"The church was full of Christian worshipers and tourists; the aim was to terrorize them and to indicate that Christians are not wanted in the occupied Palestinian areas," the statement claimed.

Palestinian Minister of Tourism Rula May'ah told Arab News that the attack was part of an orchestrated campaign targeting tourism in Palestine. "This is part of a continuous set of attacks by the Israeli occupiers on our people and our holy places, but it will not succeed in affecting tourism to Palestine," May'ah said, adding that a record 3.25 million tourists visited Bethlehem in 2019.

Rosenfeld insisted that the man armed with a knife posed no threat, and that tourism was unaffected. "Tourism in the area is functioning, thousands are able to visit the church without any problems," he said.

Dimitri Diliani, president of the Jerusalem-based National Christian Coalition, said he held the Israeli government responsible for the incident, and for the leniency that was shown to the attacker.

"This is a ridiculous claim," Diliani said of Rosenfeld's remarks that the incident was not dangerous. "The Israeli police acted to protect a Jewish terrorist. There is clear evidence of Israeli institutional racism and the dehumanization of Palestinians. If (the detained man) was Palestinian, he would have been shot on the spot, even if he didn't pose a threat – as we have witnessed many times."

The Foreign Ministry's statement also questioned whether the man was acting of his own accord or whether he was following someone else's directives. "Was he sent on purpose at this special time for Christians around the world to hurt Christian tourism in the Palestinian areas?" the statement asked.



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## [Two Iran prisoners begin hunger strike, supporters say](#)

Author:

Reuters

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PARIS: Two foreign academics detained in Iran have begun a hunger strike in protest against their incarceration, according to a letter published by their supporters.

Franco-Iranian researcher Fariba Adelkhah and British-Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert said in the letter dated Dec. 24 they had begun refusing food and water at the Evin prison in Tehran where they are being held. The women's protest was also announced in a tweet by the international research institute at France's Sciences Po school, where Adelkhah is employed as a senior research fellow.

"CERI confirms the hunger strike begun by Fariba Adelkhah and her co-detainee



Kylie Moore-Gilbert,” the institute said on Wednesday.

Iran has stepped up detentions of foreign and dual nationals amid a protracted standoff with Western powers, after the United States withdrew from an international agreement to curb Iranian nuclear activities and reimposed sanctions on Tehran.

Moore-Gilbert, a specialist in Middle East politics at the University of Melbourne, has been detained for more than a year. British and Australian media have reported that she has been sentenced to 10 years in jail by Iranian authorities.

Adelkhah was arrested by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard this year and accused of spying.

In their letter, the academics said they had been “subjected to psychological torture and numerous violations of our basic human rights”, without elaborating.

Iran has rebuffed French President Emmanuel Macron’s demands that it release Adelkah and Roland Marchal, her Sciences Po colleague who was also arrested in October.



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# Lebanon's leaders in blame game over crisis

Author:

Thu, 2019-12-26 01:37

BEIRUT: Tensions between Lebanon's president and former prime minister have flared after they accused each other of being to blame for the turmoil engulfing the country.

A recession, massive street protests and a political crisis have created financial and security chaos.

Lebanon has had a caretaker government since Oct. 29, when Saad Hariri resigned as prime minister after nearly two weeks of protests.

He has clashed with President Michel Aoun about the leadership and composition of a new administration.

"The problem with the president is that he is acting as if nothing has happened in the country, and he is trying to act smart by endorsing the demands of the revolution, and my stance is clear, I will not be represented in this government and I will not nominate anyone, nor will I give it a confidence vote," said Hariri.

"Now they are targeting the political legacy of the Hariri family, and they will try to hold it responsible for all the calamities that have befallen the country, but whoever tries to bury Hariri's legacy will be as if he would be burying himself. Let us see who really stole from the country. I will not cover anyone, and they should do the same thing."

Aoun responded to Hariri by saying: "Does he envy me for my resilience and calmness in trying to control the situation, or does he want me to act foolishly and badly? We waited for 100 days for him (Hariri) and nothing came out. We waited for someone who kept hesitating. I want, and I do not want, as if someone was playing with a daisy. A government cannot be formed in this manner."

Dr. Hassan Diab, a university professor and former education minister, has been nominated to replace Hariri and has started consulting with parliamentary blocs to discuss the shape of a future government.

But he faces significant hurdles, including a boycott by influential political blocs that refused to nominate him because of the backing he received from the Free Patriotic Movement, Hezbollah, the Amal party and their allies.

Bechara Al-Rahi, the Maronite Patriarch, on Sunday urged all political parties to cooperate with Diab and facilitate the formation of a rescue emergency government.

Protesters have demonstrated in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon against Diab, saying he should abandon the post because he is a member of the ruling elite. Demonstrators blame the ruling elite for widespread corruption and mismanagement in Lebanon.



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Lebanon's population hits 4.8m with 20% non-Lebanese

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## [Turkey readying to give Libya military support](#)

Thu, 2019-12-26 01:04

ANKARA: Turkey is ready to give Libya military support, a spokesman for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, with the country's Parliament readying to authorize troop deployment.

Turkey backs the government of Fayeza Al-Serraj in Libya, which has been split into rival political and military factions since 2011 when ruler Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed.



Al-Serraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) has been battling the forces of veteran eastern commander Khalifa Haftar, who launched an offensive to seize Tripoli from fighters loyal to the GNA.

Turkey and Libya recently signed a military cooperation deal. It includes provisions for a quick reaction force if requested by Tripoli.

"We will continue to support the internationally recognized Libyan government. This support may be in terms of military training, or other areas, such as political support," presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said after Omer Celik, a spokesman for the ruling Justice and Development Party, said the country would use hard power instruments to protect its national interests if necessary.

The military cooperation deal has been criticized by the Turkish opposition, which said further military supplies to the GNA breach a UN arms embargo.

But Erdogan pledged Sunday to intensify military backing to Libya along with ground, air and marine options. Some Turkish media have reported that the government may establish a military base in Libya to support its operations.

"It is important not to confuse Erdogan's rhetoric and the physical reality of the actions he has taken lately," Jalel Harchaoui, a Libya expert at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, told Arab News. "Those are two very different things."

He recalled that Turkey sent around 60 national intelligence officers to operate combat drones in Libya during the summer, in violation of the arms embargo.

## **HIGHLIGHT**

The Turkish opposition has criticized military cooperation deal, saying military supplies to the Tripoli administration breach a UN arms embargo.

He said that the operation, although clandestine, helped the GNA to survive. "However, that Turkish mission stopped almost entirely in the second half of October. After the defense accord was signed on November 27, the mission has been partially resumed. But it is now a much more timid, much smaller version of summer's operation. Very few airstrikes are being carried out by the Turks on behalf of Libya's internationally recognized government."

Ankara was only talking about possibly sending government troops, he said, but none of it had happened.

"Turkey's intervention right now is much smaller than three or four months ago. And even back then, the Turkish military intervention was remarkably smaller than the Emiratis' own military intervention, which now involves airstrikes conducted using fighter jets on a routine basis. Overall, since April, the total number of Emirati drone strikes has been three times as

large as the Turkish drone strikes in Libya.”

Harchaoui said that Ankara seemed “deeply interested” in attempting some sort of diplomatic entente, particularly with Russia.

Russia has said it is concerned about the possibility of Turkey deploying troops in Libya. Russian President Vladimir Putin is visiting Turkey next month, with the two nations expected to launch an important Libya initiative.

Erdogan said Wednesday he had discussed with his Tunisian counterpart, President Kais Saied, possible steps and cooperation to establish a cease-fire in Libya.

In a news conference alongside Saied, Erdogan said he believed Tunisia would have “valuable and constructive” contributions to establishing stability in Libya.



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