

Haftar forces to target Turkish troops entering Libyan territory

Thu, 2019-12-19 22:27

TRIPOLI: The Libyan Army has warned that it would target any Turkish forces entering Libya.

The threat came after Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), based in the capital Tripoli, approved the implementation of a military deal with Turkey, paving the way for a bigger role for Ankara in the conflict-hit country.

Brig. Khaled Al-Mahjoub, director of moral guidance in Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, said in statement to Al Arabiya, that it was unlikely Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan would send troops to Libya, "because this violates UN Security Council resolutions."

He said any Turkish troops setting foot on Libyan territory would be considered "hostile" forces and legitimate target.

He added that the decision of GNA head, Fayez Serraj, to activate the military cooperation agreement with Turkey was only "aimed at boosting his militia's morale."

A GNA statement said its Cabinet had "unanimously approved the implementation of the memorandum of understanding on security and military cooperation between the GNA and the Turkish government signed on Nov. 27."

The GNA, which met in the presence of military officials, gave no further details about the terms of the agreement or the assistance Ankara could provide to pro-GNA forces facing an offensive by Haftar.

Erdogan said on Dec. 10 that Ankara was ready to send troops to Libya to support the GNA after the deal agreed on Nov. 27 in Istanbul with Sarraj.

"If Libya makes such a request from us, we can send our personnel there, especially after striking the military security agreement," he said.

According to the UN, Turkey has already supplied military equipment to forces loyal to the GNA, including tanks and drones.



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Libya's GNA says ready to implement military deal with Turkey
Libya's Haftar announces 'decisive battle' for Tripoli

[US investigation into Saudi Aramco attack says strikes came from north, 'likely Iran'](#)

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Thu, 2019-12-19 16:26

WASHINGTON: The US said new evidence and analysis of weapons debris recovered from an attack on Saudi Aramco oil facilities on Sept. 14 indicates the strike likely came from the north, reinforcing its earlier assessment that Iran was behind the offensive.

In an interim report of its investigation – seen by Reuters ahead of a

presentation on Thursday to the UN Security Council – Washington assessed that before hitting its targets, one of the drones traversed a location approximately 200 km (124 miles) to the northwest of the attack site. “This, in combination with the assessed 900 kilometer maximum range of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), indicates with high likelihood that the attack originated north of Abqaiq,” the interim report said, referring to the location of one of the Saudi Aramco oil facilities that were hit.



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It added the US had identified several similarities between the drones used in the raid and an Iranian designed and produced unmanned aircraft known as the IRN-05 UAV.

However, the report noted that the analysis of the weapons debris did not definitely reveal the origin of the strike that initially knocked out half of Saudi Arabia's oil production.

"At this time, the US Intelligence Community has not identified any information from the recovered weapon systems used in the 14 September attacks on Saudi Arabia that definitively reveals an attack origin," it said. The new findings include freshly declassified information, a State Department official told Reuters.

The United States, European powers and Saudi Arabia blamed the Sept. 14 attack on Iran. Yemen's Houthi militias claimed responsibility for the attacks, while Iran, which supports the Houthis, denied any involvement. Reuters reported last month that Iran's leadership approved the attacks but decided to stop short of a direct confrontation that could trigger a devastating US response. It opted instead to hit the Abqaiq and the Khurais oil plants in Saudi Arabia, according to three officials familiar with the meetings and a fourth close to Iran's decision making.

According to the Reuters report a Middle East source, who was briefed by a country investigating the attack, said the launch site was the Ahvaz air base in southwest Iran, which is about 650 km north of Abqaiq.

Some of the craft flew over Iraq and Kuwait en route to the attack, according to a Western intelligence source cited by the report, giving Iran plausible deniability.

The 17-minute strike by 18 drones and three low-flying missiles caused a spike in oil prices, fires and damage and shut down more than 5% of global oil supply. Saudi Arabia said on Oct. 3 that it had fully restored oil

output.

The US will present its findings to a closed-door session of the UN Security Council as it hopes to mobilize more support for its policy to isolate Iran and force it to the negotiating table for a new nuclear deal.

The report noted that Yemen's Houthis "have not shown to be in possession, nor been assessed to be in possession" of the type of drones used in the attacks on the Aramco facilities.

Washington's interim assessment also included several pictures of drone components including the engine identified by the United States as "closely resembling" or "nearly identical" to those that have been observed on other Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles.

It also provided pictures of a compass circuit board that was recovered from the attack with a marking that is likely indicating a potential manufacturing date written in the Persian calendar year, the report assessed.

The name of a company believed to be associated with Iran, SADRA, was also identified on a wiring harness label from the Sept. 14 wreckage, the report said.

US President Donald Trump last year withdrew from a 2015 nuclear deal between world powers and Iran and snapped back sanctions on Tehran with the aim of choking Iranian crude sales, the Islamic Republic's main source of revenues. As part of its 'maximum pressure' campaign, Washington has also sanctioned dozens of Iranian entities, companies and individuals in a bid to cut off Tehran's revenue streams.



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EU countries right to blame Iran for Saudi Aramco attacks: Al-Jubeir

[Iranian regime has transformed country into rogue state: Pompeo](#)

Thu, 2019-12-19 18:45

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Thursday that the Iranian regime has transformed the country into a "rogue state" over several decades of its governance.

In an address in Washington, Pompeo also urged Iranian officials to act as a "natural country" and to open the door of progress for the Iranian people.

He also confirmed the US's stance of standing with the Iranian people and its support for their demands being met.

Pompeo said: "The system is draining the money of the Iranian people to be spent in Syria and Yemen," in a reference to Iranian influence in the Middle East.

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[UN hosts renewed talks on contested Yemeni port city](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-18 22:41

SANAA: Yemen's warring parties have renewed talks on how to implement a year-old truce in the contested port city of Hodeidah.

The two days of meetings are taking place on a boat off the coast of the city, according to a statement by the United Nations mission tasked with supporting the agreement. Previous negotiations between the Iran-backed Houthi militia and the Arab coalition fighting in support of the internationally recognized government have repeatedly collapsed. The war is five years old.

The warring sides signed a UN-brokered agreement last December in Sweden that

included a cease-fire for Hodeidah and an exchange of more than 15,000 prisoners. But the deal was never fully implemented. This week's talks are centered on how both sides will redeploy forces from strategic areas in Hodeidah, which has seen some of the war's worst fighting, and on who will oversee administration of the country's most important shipping port. They come amid a renewed push for peace. The UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, was also in the Houthi-held capital of Sanaa for meetings with Houthi officials on Monday. Last week, several international aid groups warned that Hodeidah remains the most dangerous place in the war-torn, impoverished Arab country. Since December of last year, the groups said in a statement that the port city and surrounding province has seen 799 civilians killed and wounded, the highest toll nationwide. Yemen's conflict began in 2014, when the Iran-backed Shiite militia known as Houthis overran the capital, Sanaa, and much of the north. They pushed out Yemen's internationally recognized government and ushered in the civil war that has killed tens of thousands of people.



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Iraqi parties debate PM candidates, already rejected by the street

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Wed, 2019-12-18 18:54

BAGHDAD: The day before the deadline to designate a new Iraqi prime minister, political parties were wrangling Wednesday over three candidates: all insiders and all rejected by a months-old anti-government protest movement. President Barham Saleh has until midnight Thursday to appoint a replacement for outgoing premier Adel Abdel Mahdi, who resigned after two months of unprecedented demonstrations that have rocked the capital Baghdad and Shiite-majority south.

The protests continue to push for the overhaul of the political system in place since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, defying violence that has left around 460 dead and 25,000 wounded.

As candidates' names were leaked in recent weeks, giant posters of them with their faces crossed out in red quickly appeared in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, epicenter of the protests since October 1.

On Wednesday, three names appeared to remain on the table after many meetings of party heads and other leaders of parliamentary groups.

Qusay Al-Suhail, outgoing higher education minister, has for several weeks been presented by officials as the candidate of Iran.

Iran wields growing clout in Iraq, with its emissary Major General Qasem Soleimani presiding over the negotiations.

A former key member of Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr's movement, Suhail rejoined the Rule of Law Alliance of former prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki – close to Iran and enemy of Sadr – and seems to become the favorite for the premiership.

But the Iraqi political machine can be fickle.

Earlier Wednesday, the front-runner was Mohammed Al-Soudani, 49, former minister and ex-governor of a southern province now in the grip of protests and violence.

His demotion is due to his not having been received by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani – longtime kingmaker in Iraqi politics – when he presented himself to be endorsed in Najaf a few days ago, according to sources in the Shiite shrine city.

The 89-year-old cleric, the highest religious authority for the majority of Iraqi Shiites, had already said – for the first time – that he did not want to be involved in the formation of the new government.

A third candidate is intelligence chief Moustafa Al-Kazemi, a shadowy figure seen as backed by the US.

If parliament does not approve a candidate who has emerged from inter-party negotiations, then the president has the constitutional right to appoint the premier himself.

“He's betting on a last-minute intervention,” one political official told

AFP.

Another possible twist: no candidate is approved, the post of prime minister will be vacant from Thursday at midnight. Under the constitution, that would place Saleh in the post himself.

Formally, the "largest coalition" in parliament should present a candidate to the president, who then submits his name to a vote.

But so far, neither the president nor parliament has said which coalition is the largest.

Adding to the uncertainty, on Wednesday an outspoken liberal lawmaker critical of Iraq's endemic corruption threw his hat into the ring.

Fayeq Al-Sheikh Ali presented his "candidacy to... form a professional and non-partisan government," in a letter to Saleh which he also shared with his more than 285,000 Twitter followers.

Head of a secular alliance, Sheikh Ali won a parliamentary seat last year after promising to counter Islamists' efforts to ban alcohol in the country. He was stripped of his immunity from prosecution in September following accusations he praised Saddam Hussein's Baath party, despite his long history of opposing the executed dictator.

But he has already generated enthusiasm in the street and on social media, with protesters saying he would be a sign of change.

"The government only exchanges positions between the same people, as if it was playing a game of chess," said 23-year-old protester Hussein Ali in Tahrir Square.

"Neither Soudani nor Suhail represent us. I reject them and so does the whole of Tahrir Square."

Umm Mohammed, a protester in her 50s, said she was fed up with the political class.

"We have already tested them and we no longer want them," she said.

"We want a prime minister who comes from the people, someone who is protesting here with us."



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