

More Iran sanctions needed to squeeze Hezbollah, says US Congressman Darrell Issa

Wed, 2022-05-25 21:52

DAVOS, Switzerland: The Biden administration ought to apply further sanctions on Iran as a means of curtailing the influence of its Hezbollah proxy in Lebanon, says Darrell Issa, a US congressman who is part of the American delegation at the World Economic Forum.

Despite generating little of its own revenues, Hezbollah has long enjoyed free rein in Lebanon thanks to Iranian largess, Issa says. He believes targeting Iran with further sanctions would undermine the militia's control over Lebanese affairs.

"As much as I want to sanction Hezbollah, the group doesn't generate much of their own money," Issa, a California Republican, told Arab News on the fringes of WEF in Davos, Switzerland, on Wednesday.

"Their money is disproportionate because of Iranian influence. So, yes, while I do want more bank sanctions, those are ultimately irrelevant, unless we increase our sanctions on Iran."

Issa was among a group of US congressmen who traveled to Lebanon on a fact-finding mission in November last year, later reporting back to President Joe Biden and Congress to propose ways to help the Lebanese.

Iran has a policy of arming and funding proxy militias in neighboring countries to further its own geopolitical agenda, often to the detriment of the security and well-being of local populations.

Although Lebanon's May 15 parliamentary election returned a poor result for Hezbollah and its allies, Issa says history shows the need to follow through on the results and not to simply return to business as usual.

"If there's a follow through, then there should be a new speaker and a new president free of unfair influence by Hezbollah," Issa told Arab News.

"There should be a realignment of ministries, and more than anything else there should be a resolution to end corruption.

"So far, the only thing we have are candidates who campaigned against corruption and who have achieved their goal of changing the majority, but they haven't achieved the goal of ending corruption yet."

Hezbollah, the only militia that did not disarm after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war, lost its majority in the Lebanese parliament, with its bloc winning just 62 of the 128 seats on offer – three fewer than it needed.

The election of many anti-corruption independents has presented Lebanon with a rare opportunity to break free of the militia's grip on public life and to carry out urgent reforms.

Since 2019, Lebanon has been in the throes of its worst ever financial crisis, which has been further compounded by the economic strain of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nation's political paralysis.

For many Lebanese, the final straw was the Beirut port blast of Aug. 2020, which killed 218, injured 7,000, caused \$15 billion in property damage, and left an estimated 300,000 people homeless.

These concurrent crises have sent thousands of young Lebanese abroad in search of security and opportunity, including many of the country's top medical professionals and educators. For Issa, preventing this brain-drain ought to be a high priority for any incoming government.

"Lebanon can turn around very quickly, but only if those people are still in the country," Issa said. "And today, the US is trying to help, but there's a lot of exodus from Lebanon, and that is going to hurt the recovery."

INTERVIEW

More Iran sanctions needed to squeeze Hezbollah, says US congressman

Lebanon must follow through on election results by ending corruption and malign influence, says US representative

Tarek Ali Ahmad Davos

US President Joe Biden should apply further sanctions on Iran to curtail the influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon, a US congressman has told the World Economic Forum.

Darrell Issa, a Republican representative from California, said that despite generating little of its own revenues, Hezbollah has long enjoyed free rein in Lebanon thanks to Iranian support.

The congressman said targeting Iran with further sanctions would undermine the militia's control over Lebanese affairs.

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The Iranian-backed Hezbollah was the only militia that did not disarm after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war. The group and its allies have now lost their majority in the Lebanese parliament. AFP

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IRAN

Iran systematically undermines the stability of the region, Israeli president tells WEF

Arab News Davos

Iran is undermining the stability of the region and Israel cannot accept Tehran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, the Israeli President Isaac Herzog told the World Economic Forum on Wednesday.

"The Iranian regime systematically undermines the stability of the region, Israel and all nations of the world cannot accept Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, recognizing the threat it poses to Israel and the entire Middle East," Herzog said.

He said that every country or region infiltrated by Iran has had "the life sucked out of its people and its land," and that Tehran spreads hate, pain and suffering.

"Prosperity, human liberty, creativity and growth are all erased," he said, pointing to what has happened in Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, Syria and Lebanon.

"Israel is eager to share its prosperity and successes with all its neighbors to break down barriers imposed by Iran's influence. I truly believe that if we only choose the forces of light, the path to a drastically different brighter future is closer than we can imagine," Herzog said.

He added that Israelis will always extend their hands for peace to their neighbors from the "Levant to the Gulf, from the Maghreb to the Mashreq, from our immediate neighbours the Palestinians to the entire Muslim world, and also to the entire continent of Africa, and the entire Middle East."

When asked whether Saudi Arabia would follow in the footsteps of its Gulf neighbors the UAE and Bahrain in normalizing relations with Israel, Herzog said that although the Kingdom is a "very important country in the



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region," the process of joining the Abraham Accords "has to take its time."

"I think the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a very important country in the region. And we would love to see developments in that direction, but it's a process that has to take its

time I guess," Herzog commented.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan reiterated the Kingdom's stance regarding normalization with Israel at the WEF on Tuesday, saying nothing had changed despite recent unconfirmed media reports suggesting otherwise.

"I've addressed that several times in the past and nothing has changed in how we view the subject. I think we have always seen normalization as the end result, but the end result of a path," Prince Faisal told the WEF.

"We always envisioned that there will be full normalization with Israel, and I've said before that a full normalization between us and Israel, between the region and Israel, will bring immense benefits — we won't be able to reap those benefits unless we address the issue of Palestine," the foreign minister said.

Herzog also spoke about the death of veteran Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was killed in Jenin while covering Israeli raids on a refugee camp in the West Bank on May 11.

"This is of course a very sad event. And it pains me like it pains many Israelis," the president said. He said that Israel offered the Palestinians a joint investigation into the circumstances of the "tragic event" but that the Palestinians refused to cooperate.

"They took the body. They took the bullet and one cannot substantiate any one of the scenarios without those facts. And Israel was open and transparent and offered the US to join this process of investigation as well because we pay high importance to the freedom of speech and the work of journalists and media channels, and we respect them," he added.





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Iran systematically undermines the stability of the region, Israeli president tells WEFUS negotiator says odds against reviving Iran deal

[UN envoy says Yemen talks to reopen roads 'collective victory'](#)

Wed, 2022-05-25 20:08

LONDON: UN envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg said on Wednesday that talks between the Yemeni government and the Houthi militia to reopen roads will be a collective victory for Yemen

"The parties are fulfilling a commitment they made under the truce to work on an agreement that will reduce the suffering of Yemenis in Taiz and other governorates," he said.

“We want to support the parties in setting them on a path that would take Yemen out of a cycle of violence that has severely restricted people’s freedom of movement for more than seven years,” he added. Representatives from the internationally-recognized government and the Iran-backed Houthis held a meeting on opening roads in Taiz and other governorates as per the truce agreement in the Jordanian capital, Amman, under the auspices of the UN envoy. As part of the truce, the parties have also made important progress toward resuming commercial flights to and from Sanaa airport, the envoy’s office said, adding more than 1,000 passengers have traveled so far and the frequency of flights is increasing.

Grundberg: “We want to support the parties in setting them on a path that would take Yemen out of a cycle of violence that has severely restricted people’s freedom of movement for more than seven years.”

– @OSE_Yemen (@OSE_Yemen) [May 25, 2022](#)

Preparations are now under way to resume flights between Sanaa and the Egyptian capital, Cairo, the statement added. “This will allow more Yemenis to travel abroad to access medical care, educational and trade opportunities, and to visit family,” said Grundberg. “I am grateful to the government of Egypt for its cooperation on facilitating flights from Sanaa to Cairo and its active support to the UN’s peace efforts.” Grundberg said he is also working to renew the current truce agreement, which is approaching the end of its two-month period on June 2. “We have seen the tangible benefits the truce has delivered so far for the daily lives of Yemenis. The parties need to renew the truce to extend and

consolidate these benefits to the people of Yemen who have suffered over seven years of war,” Grundberg said.

“The parties need to seize this opportunity, by implementing and renewing the truce and negotiating more durable solutions on security, political and economic issues, including revenues and salaries, to support a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict,” he added.



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Yemenia to operate direct flights between Houthi-held Sanaa, Cairo
Pressure mounts on Houthis to lift Taiz siege

[UN warns Sudan's future hangs in](#)

balance as political stalemate persists

Author:

Tue, 2022-05-24 23:49

NEW YORK: The UN on Tuesday urged the ruling authorities in Sudan to reassure the public that they support dialogue as the only way to reach a political solution to the unrest in the country.

Volker Perthes, the special representative of the UN secretary-general for Sudan, said that to get the political transition in the country back on track, the authorities first need to release remaining detainees, halt arbitrary arrests, and lift the state of emergency.

Time is running out for a political solution that can chart a path out of the current situation, he added, which remains precarious and with much at stake, including the country's political, social and economic stability.

Perthes was speaking during a meeting of the Security Council to discuss the latest developments in the African country, a few days after another peaceful protester was killed by the authorities. The number of demonstrators killed since the military coup on Oct. 25 last year now stands at 96.

"If the authorities want to build trust, it is essential that those responsible for violence against protesters be held to account," Perthes said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's latest report on Sudan stated that the lack of political agreement and of a "fully credible" government is affecting the security situation.

The Security Council meeting also came in the wake of armed clashes between Arab and Masalit communities in Kereneik, West Darfur, in April during which, initial reports suggested, 150 people were killed, many more injured, thousands displaced, and homes, a police station, a hospital and a market were burned down.

Perthes welcomed the decision by armed groups and regular forces to accept the Permanent Ceasefire Committee, chaired by the UN mission in the country, as a joint institution to help bring the conflict under control but warned that despite this, "the risk of a new outbreak of violence remains high."

Although he welcomed the recent release of 86 detainees as an important step toward creating conditions conducive to rebuilding trust, he stressed that at least 111 people are still being held in Khartoum, Port Sudan and other cities.

Peaceful protests continue in Sudan amid public demands for change and the restoration of the democratic transitional process, even as several political parties and coalitions form new alliances and put forward proposals for talks

with rivals.

“As Sudan continues to confront further uncertainty, the shared sense of urgency, combined with their vision for a better future, is driving many parties to seek common ground and increasing openness to dialogue,” Perthes told the members of the Security Council.

“There is also a growing recognition of the need for civilian-military dialogue.”

However, he added that some key stakeholders continue to reject calls for face-to-face talks with their counterparts and prefer to participate indirectly. For that reason, on May 12 the UN launched indirect talks to address a number of core issues, including “the term and composition of key constitutional organs, the future relationship between the military and civilian components, and the mechanism and criteria for the selection of a prime minister.”

Once an understanding is reached on such issues, Perthes said a trilateral mechanism that includes the UN, the African Union, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, an eight-country African trade bloc, will convene for negotiations.

He warned, however, of “‘spoilers,’ who do not want a peaceful transition to democracy or refuse a solution through dialogue. The Sudanese parties should not allow such spoilers to undermine the opportunity of finding a negotiated exit to the crisis.”

The envoy also stressed that the protection of civilians requires the root causes of the conflict to be addressed, including decades of marginalization, land issues, and the return of internally displaced persons and refugees.

The political stalemate, combined with an economic crisis, poor harvests and global supply shocks, continues to exact a heavy socioeconomic toll on Sudan, where humanitarian needs are incessantly growing amid a 250 percent increase in food prices. According to the UN, the number of people in the country facing acute hunger is projected to double to about 18 million by September this year.

Perthes lamented the fact that the 2022 humanitarian response plan for Sudan has only received “an abysmal” 13 percent of funding, with international donors and financial institutions balking at providing assistance that goes through state systems in the absence of a political agreement to restore constitutional legitimacy.

“While the primary responsibility for these changes lies with the Sudanese stakeholders themselves, I am concerned about the long-term consequences as we watch the further erosion of Sudan’s already fragile state capacity and human capital,” he said.

He also warned that some of the critical assistance from the World Bank Group’s International Development Association 19 that is allocated to Sudan will go to other countries by the end of June if a political agreement cannot

be reached in the country by then.

“If a solution to the current impasse is not found, the consequences will be felt beyond Sudan’s borders and for a generation,” Perthes said.



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[Lebanon crippled by electricity, water outages](#)

Tue, 2022-05-24 19:54

BEIRUT: Lebanon has been plunged into darkness after oil stocks in the country’s last functional power plant in Deir Ammar ran out on Tuesday morning.

Lebanon exhausted its oil stock, which it imports from Iraq, during the parliamentary elections to ensure power was maintained during the electoral process. The country has to wait for an oil tanker to arrive at the end of

the week, then wait some more until the oil is tested before it can be unloaded.

Elsewhere, the Beirut and Mount Lebanon Water Establishment has announced that it has been "reluctantly forced" to subject the locations to "severe and harsh" water rationing.

The shortage of diesel, the steady rise in prices and the extensive power cuts are hindering pumping stations from providing water supply, the authorities said, warning of further deterioration. The water establishment added that should any pumping station go out of service, securing the needed funds to repair it would be close to impossible.

The Lebanese have for many years provided alternatives to the basic state services, including a mass market for power generators. However, hundreds of thousands can no longer afford any of these alternatives.

On Tuesday, the local currency hit a new record low, trading at 34,100 Lebanese pounds to the dollar on the black market.

Pharmacy owners staged a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Health on Tuesday to demand "implementing the laws of delivering medicines to pharmacies and fighting the phenomenon of smuggling drugs outside Lebanon, specifically to Syria."

Dr. Joe Salloum, head of the Pharmacists' Syndicate, said patients are being subjected to several types of fraud. "Some cancer patients bought medicine that turned out to be counterfeit, while the state and the ministry fails to draw up a solid plan to provide necessary, quality medication."

He added: "Leaving room for smuggled and counterfeit medicine amid chaos and fraud threatens the lives of patients, if they can even afford to buy any medicine."

Salloum said the whole mess could have been avoided if the medication card had been approved two years ago. "(It looks) as if there was a plan to destroy the entire sector, including pharmacies, importing companies, and Lebanon's medical identity."

Amid the chaos, Prime Minister Najib Mikati's government has entered into caretaker mode after failing to approve an electricity plan.

The picture in the newly elected parliament remains blurred as MPs struggle to find ground with the new reformist MP surge.

Mikati revealed that Energy Minister Walid Fayyad deliberately obstructed the offers submitted by General Electric and Siemens in agreement with international groups to supply Lebanon with electricity at a reasonable price.

Mikati said Fayyad withdrew the file from the Cabinet's agenda 15 minutes before the final session was held on May 21, claiming the offers needed "further reviewing."

Mikati insisted on pursuing the issue and asked Fayyad "to dare to name the person who asked him to withdraw the file from the Cabinet's agenda and why," in an indirect reference to Gebran Bassil, head of the Free Patriotic Movement.

"The government had decided to negotiate with four international companies, namely Ensaldo, Mitsubishi, General Electric and Siemens on the possibility of providing Lebanon with generators needed to produce 24-hour electricity permanently," Mikati said, adding: "General Electric and Siemens, in agreement with international groups, made offers to supply Lebanon with electricity before next summer at a very reasonable price, even about the

price of gas for energy production, and we simply needed to draw up the terms of reference following the applicable laws.”

A source close to Mikati said: “The cost of preparing the terms of reference was agreed upon with the French side but without any warning. President Michel Aoun’s political team decided to withdraw the file from the Cabinet’s agenda in refusal to record achievement in securing electricity for a government in which the FPM is not directly present.”

Aoun’s meeting on Tuesday with Anne Grillo, the French ambassador to Lebanon, focused on the upcoming elections and the Lebanese-French cooperation in all fields. Grillo conveyed French President Emmanuel Macron’s continued support for Lebanon and its people.

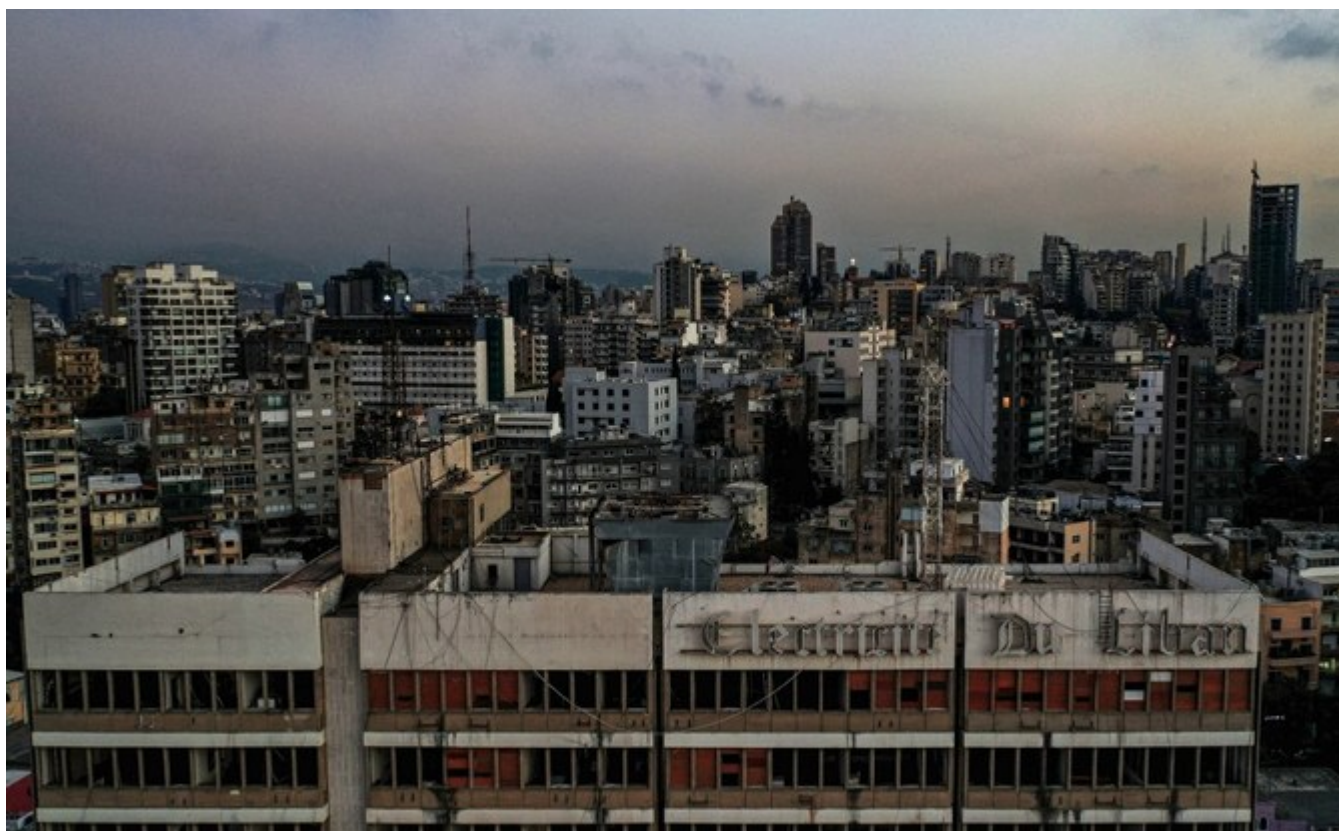
During the Fifth Saudi-Lebanese Cultural Forum, held on Monday evening at the residence of Walid Bukhari, the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon, he spoke about Mufti Sheikh Hassan Khaled, who was assassinated in an explosion targeting his convoy on May 16, 1989.

“His assassination was a prelude to the assassination of all of Lebanon, which is experiencing difficult circumstances, foremost of which is the targeting of its Arab identity and its relationship with its Arab environment.”

Bukhari also mentioned the “martyrdom” of Lebanon and the Arab world regarding the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

“We know Sheikh Khaled would be happy with the results of the honorable elections and the downfall of all symbols of treachery, betrayal, death and hate,” Bukhari said.

Speaking at the forum, Lebanon’s Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdel Latif Derian stressed the comprehensive role that Sheikh Khaled played “so that the political quorum and Beirut remain standing, lest the divisions of the war affect the relations between Muslims and Christians, the sons of one nation.”



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[Turkey hints at Syria operation amid discussions of NATO enlargement](#)

Tue, 2022-05-24 19:04

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced on Monday evening an impending military operation into northern Syria to establish a 30 km-deep safe zone along the southern border.

Turkey's operation is expected to focus on areas where the country is targeted the most by cross-border attacks. But Erdogan did not go into further detail.

Turkish forces have launched three major incursions into northern Syria since 2016 and took control of areas along the border against threats from Daesh and the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG, listed as a terror group by Turkey.

The withdrawal of the Syrian Kurdish forces up to 30 km into Syria was part of the Russia-Turkey deal in Sochi.

The announcement comes at a time in which Turkey is vehemently objecting to the NATO membership bids of Sweden and Finland, citing the two Scandinavian countries' support for the terror groups and their arms embargoes following Turkey's previous Syria operation in 2019.

Although the two countries deny any support given to the terror groups on their soil, Ankara asked Sweden and Finland for the extradition of 33 members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and an end to the ongoing military export bans to Turkey.

Turkey considers the YPG as the Syrian offshoot of the PKK.

The timing of the announcement, therefore, stirred debate about whether it would be part of a grand bargain between Turkey and the Western alliance to decrease its support for the Syrian Kurdish militants in exchange for Ankara

lessening its pressure on the enlargement goals of the organization.

Noah Ringler, an expert from Georgetown University, thinks the northwestern Syrian city of Tal Rifaat is the most likely target of the operation, while Kobane or Manbij is the next most likely option.

"I believe Erdogan still seeks a broader deal with US President Joe Biden on NATO enlargement and the purchase of American-made F-16s and would not like to confront US forces further east near Al-Malikiyah," he told Arab News.

An operation in Tal Rifaat, situated halfway between Aleppo and the Turkish border, has been on the agenda for years as the YPG seized control in the region. The city houses Kurds who fled Afrin when Turkey carried out an operation there in 2018 to root the YPG out.

Ankara, however, perceives a threat coming from the Tal Rifaat area, which is believed to be used by Kurdish forces to conduct cross-border attacks on Turkey.

There have been several fire exchanges between Turkish forces and Syrian Kurdish militants for a couple of months.

As Tal Rifaat is home to many refugees living in Kilis and Azaz and has limited Russian and Iranian presence, Ringler said that Russia is likely willing to let Turkey attack within certain areas with some pre-conditions, like ensuring the lack of Turkish sanctions on Russian goods and services.

"Russia may also ask Turkey to put pressure on the PYD (Kurdish Democratic Union Party) to return them to the table with Syrian President Bashar Assad, as talks have stalled," he added.

Experts also note that any such operation could take advantage of Russia's preoccupation with the invasion of Ukraine and US commitments to defend Taiwan against China.

According to Ringler, Turkey's drone strikes on the YPG in northeastern Syria have always been satisficing, as elections in Turkey draw near.

"Erdogan considers taking new steps as vital to distract the attention from domestic issues and divide the opposition over Kurdish and Syrian issues," he said.

The details of the operation and the decision to launch it will however be discussed during Turkey's National Security Council meeting on Thursday.

Whether the operation has or will have the green light from Russia and US is still unclear.

"Turkish Armed Forces have the capacity to attack all of the above areas, but for political reasons it is likely the best for Erdogan to do sequential operations, threatening additional action closer to next year's elections and in order to gain concessions from the US, Iran, Russia and the YPG," said Ringler.

He added: "I think Assad's forces will fight back like in February 2020, and the extent of Russian air support will be a key indicator of the extent to which Turkey is coordinating with Russia. Assad's forces are unlikely to give up positions without trying to impose costs on Turkish-backed Syrian armed groups and the Turkish Armed Forces for their presence in Syria."

According to Ringler, US Congressional elections will also play a role in negotiations with the US, as presidential powers do not allow Biden to lift some of the existing sanctions and Congress remains committed to arms sanctions on Turkey related to its S-400 Russian missile defense purchase and Operation Peace Spring into Syria.

Currently hosting about 3.7 million refugees from Syria whose presence in the country has increasingly become a hot topic among several opposition parties pledging their immediate repatriation, Ankara has been discussing their resettlement to briquette houses in safe areas along the border.

The Turkish government is also worried that public anger over the refugees' widespread presence will dominate the upcoming election round and influence electoral preferences.

The latest official figures revealed that 400-500 people are returning each week to the safe zones on the Turkey-Syria border. Since 2016, around half a million Syrians have returned to those zones, which are controlled by Ankara-backed groups.

"The regions they returned to are Jarablus, A'zaz, Marea, Al-Bab, Ras Al-Ayn, and Tal Abyad. These are all safe regions in Syria that we have created," Turkey's Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu recently said.

However, the Syrian government considers the presence of safe zones as a kind of "colonialism" and "ethnic cleansing." Syria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently urged the international community to stop Ankara from proceeding with its plans for building houses and local infrastructure in safe zones to send 1 million refugees back to their country.

Caroline Rose, a senior analyst at the New Lines Institute, thinks that the recently announced Turkish military operation in northern Syria is certainly a tactic Ankara has employed to test Russia in Syria amid its intervention in Ukraine.

"It is also a message Turkey is wishing to send following its opposition to Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO due to grievances related to the PKK, as well as to take advantage of Russian distraction in Ukraine to alter the status quo in Syria and deepen its footprint in the northeast," she told Arab News.

Rose, however, does not think the US will offer any public or private green light for this operation, nor will Russia publicly support it.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, in a statement on Tuesday, accused Turkey of "destabilizing the region."

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, believes there is always an opportunity for Turkey to launch a tactic operation targeting a specific area.

“The most reasonable targets would be Tal Rifaat and Manbij. I don’t expect any operation on the eastern side of Syria. Turkey should concentrate its efforts and forces on controlling the strategic points on the M4 highway in Idlib that became a de facto frontier between Turkish-controlled pockets and Kurdish forces,” he told Arab News.

Erdogan’s announcement also came a day before diplomatic delegations from Sweden and Finland landed in Ankara on Tuesday to discuss their NATO membership bid, where Turkey is expected to present some files on PKK activities during their meeting with the Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin and Deputy Foreign Minister Sedat Onal on Wednesday.



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Turkey, Iran race to fill Russian ‘void’ in Syria Turkey’s opposition to NATO’s Nordic enlargement fuels row ahead of June summit