

Yerevan, Ankara to take steps to rebuild ties

Author:

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ANKARA: As part of Turkey's normalization efforts with its former foes, its Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced on Dec. 13 during a speech in parliament that Turkey and Armenia had agreed to mutually appoint special envoys for starting to mend broken ties.

After more than three decades with a closed land border which obliged Armenia to use Georgian and Iranian borders to reach out to the world, charter flights will now resume between Yerevan and Istanbul.

Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Center, Yerevan-based think tank, said this announcement – which is being seen as Turkey taking a first step in support of “normalization” with Armenia – follows several months of positive statements between Yerevan and Ankara.

Since the summer, the two countries have exchanged positive signals at the diplomatic front, with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan saying on Aug. 27 that it was considering reacting to positive public signals coming from Ankara by reciprocating with similar steps.

Two days later, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey can work to gradually normalize ties with Armenia.

Speaking during a meeting of Commonwealth of Independent States country leaders on Oct. 15, Pashinyan confirmed that normalizing ties with Turkey would contribute to establishing a lasting regional peace and implementing the agreements reached last year on the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been tense for three decades over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, a territory that is occupied by the Armenian military but is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

Last year's 44-day war over the key territory changed the regional calculus with the defeat of Armenia, which handed back the occupied territories to Azerbaijan. With this move, the main reason for Ankara to close its borders with Armenia became irrelevant.

Turkey is expected to take normalization steps with Armenia in coordination with Azerbaijan. But the extent to which Russia will be involved in the process or play a spoiler role is still unclear.

“This is significant for several reasons,” Giragosian told Arab News, adding: “First, the process of normalization, which lays the basis for eventual reconciliation, is part of a broader post-war effort to restore regional trade and transport in the South Caucasus region.”

The two countries had signed landmark peace accords – known as the “Zurich protocols” – in a bid to establish diplomatic ties and re-open the joint border in 2009, but they were never ratified, as their relations remained tense as Turkey conditioned the agreement on the withdrawal of Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Giragosian thinks that a return to diplomatic engagement between Turkey and Armenia offers a rare success in Turkish foreign policy and a positive development after months of political instability and economic crisis in Turkey.

“And this is also a component of a more ambitious Turkish effort of rapprochement with Israel, the UAE and others,” he added.

As Turkey feels excluded by Moscow in the post-war regional arrangements as it was sidelined in the Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan working group on reopening transportation links, these normalization talks will offer a chance for Turkey to have a say at the table, experts also noted.

According to Nigar Goksel, Turkey director of the International Crisis Group, Turkey and Armenia deciding to appoint special representatives is an important positive first step in what is likely to be an incremental normalization process.

“Ankara will be navigating delicately to ensure that Baku is on board at every step along the way as it progresses dialogue with Yerevan,” she told Arab News.

But Goksel thinks that Russia will also be involved in the process.

During a press briefing on Nov. 25, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that Moscow was prepared to mediate efforts to repair relations between Armenia and Turkey.

“Turkey will want to ensure regional stakeholders do not have an incentive to act as spoilers. As such I think regional transport and economic integration will be a central focus, because it is in the interests of all sides. Regional integration is likely to be the basis upon which people-to-people reconciliation will be built up in the longer term,” Goksel said.

The agreement that ended the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 included the “unblocking of regional economic and transport links” in the region, triggering debates over the prospects of opening regional transport links.

Although a welcome move, Giragosian thinks that this is merely a first step toward the minimum of relations between neighbors: The reopening of the closed border and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia.

“Nevertheless, this does reflect a new environment more conducive to de-escalation and post-war stability, as well as the start of a return to diplomacy after unprecedented Turkish military support for Azerbaijan’s war for Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020,” he said.



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Wed, 2021-12-15 00:14

NEW YORK: Yemeni staff employed by the US embassy in Sanaa are still being harassed and detained by the Houthis, the American ambassador to the UN told the Security Council on Tuesday.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield added that the militia also continues to ignore repeated calls by the international community to end its offensive in Marib, and has intensified its cross-border attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia.

These "provocative and dangerous actions (underscore) the need for Iran to end its lethal support to the Houthis, which contravenes this body's resolutions and enables the Houthis' reckless attacks," she said.

Thomas-Greenfield was speaking at a regular Security Council meeting on the situation in Yemen, during which members were briefed by Hans Grundberg, the UN's special envoy to the country. He expressed alarm about the ongoing Marib offensive, and violence he said has "escalated considerably" with the "risk that this could open a new chapter of the Yemen war that is even more fragmented and bloody."

The offensive is endangering thousands of people, Thomas-Greenfield said, and could cause the displacement of half a million civilians. "The Houthis must stop this offensive immediately," she reiterated.

On Dec. 9, a Houthi missile hit a camp for the internally displaced managed by the International Organization for Migration. Five children were among the injured.

"This is unacceptable," said Thomas-Greenfield. "We condemn in the strongest terms this and similar, all-too-frequent attacks against civilians."

The American envoy also condemned "the intensification of Houthi cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia in recent months, including three ballistic missiles launched at Riyadh just last week."

She added: "The Houthis have conducted well over 350 such attacks this year – a staggering number and a shocking increase from last year's total."

"Each of these Houthi attacks, on its own, is unacceptable. Together, they send a chilling and unmistakable signal about Houthi unwillingness to participate in a peaceful political process or in a future government that upholds the rule of law."

Turning to the seizure of the US embassy in Sanaa, Thomas-Greenfield called on the Houthis to release unharmed all remaining workers from the site who are still detained, immediately vacate the compound, return seized property and "cease their threats against their own fellow citizens, simply for being employed by us."

Operations ceased at the embassy in 2015 and American staff were withdrawn but Yemeni workers remained, providing security and caretaker services. Dozens of them were detained when the Houthis breached the compound in mid-November.

Thomas-Greenfield also issued another warning about the danger posed by the Safer, an oil tanker that has been moored in the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen since 2015 and is estimated to contain about 1.14 million barrels of oil.

Its condition has deteriorated significantly and it "remains an environmental, humanitarian, and economic threat of vast proportions," said Thomas-Greenfield.

"The Houthis bear responsibility for this situation, and the United States supports discussion of any solution that can safely and urgently address it," she added.

Calling on all parties to engage with Grundberg in his efforts to create a framework for an inclusive political process in Yemen, she warned that if the conflict continues, “Yemen’s economy will deteriorate further, and with it the livelihoods of millions of Yemenis. Lives will continue to be endangered, and generations of Yemenis will bear its scars.”

However, she added: “While the Houthis continue their escalatory actions, we welcome the efforts of other parties to improve conditions in Yemen, including the UN initiative to scale up its approach for addressing the drivers of food insecurity throughout Yemen.”

Thomas-Greenfield said that the US, like the UK, is “encouraged” by the appointment on Dec. 6 of a new governor of the Central Bank of Yemen, along with a new chairman of the board and other new board members.

“We hope these appointments serve as a step forward in addressing the economic instability that is deepening humanitarian suffering and will push forward needed reforms,” she added.

“True progress cannot be sustained, however, without additional resources. We hope countries can seize this moment to support Yemen’s economy and bring urgently needed relief to its people. The special envoy’s strong appeal for action has been heard loudly and clearly by this Council.”

She concluded: “In the face of Houthi provocations, harassment and violence against their own people, I want the Houthis to know that the United States will never give up on the people of Yemen.”



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Tue, 2021-12-14 22:16

TUNIS: Tunisia said Tuesday it had received a loan from its neighbor Algeria, the day before a visit by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.

The official journal said that President Kais Saied had signed off a deal reached on December 9 for "a loan worth \$300 million," around 266 million euros.

Tunisia's public finances have been battered by a decade of political instability, low investment and structural problems, with debts approaching 100 percent of GDP and unemployment at 18 percent.

Saied on July 25 sacked the government and seized an array of powers, but has not laid out a plan to rescue the country's dire economy, despite announcing plans on Monday night for constitutional reforms and new elections in 2022.

Tunisia's economy has grown at just 0.6 percent a year since its 2011 revolution, while inflation has surged at six percent a year.

An unwelcoming business environment has discouraged investors.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the situation in the North African country far worse, slashing jobs in the vital tourism sector, high commodity prices have hurt reserves, and a drought has battered farmers.

Tunis has received economic aid from the European Union and is seeking its fourth aid program in 10 years from the International Monetary Fund, aiming to receive a loan of nearly \$4 billion before the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Saied's opponents on Tuesday slammed his decision to extend a months-long suspension of parliament, accusing him of dealing another blow to the country's nascent democracy.

The former law professor announced an 11-week "popular consultation" to produce "draft constitutional and other reforms" ahead of a referendum next July 25.

That will mark one year since his power grab, which came as the North African

country wallowed in political and economic crises compounded by the coronavirus pandemic.

Saied had in October moved to rule by decree, escalating fears for the only democracy to have emerged from the 2011 Arab uprisings.

He said on Monday that parliament would remain suspended until new elections on December 17 next year, the anniversary of the start of the revolution that chased dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power.

That further isolated his nemesis, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, which has played a central role in Tunisian politics since Ben Ali's fall. Many Tunisians, tired of a system seen as dysfunctional and corrupt, welcomed Saied's moves, but he has also faced growing opposition in the form of demonstrations at home and pressure from abroad.

The envoys of the G7 powers plus the European Union had urged Tunisia on Friday to set a timeline for a return to democratic institutions.

Political analyst Slaheddine Jourchi said Saied was "determined to push through his political project to the end."

Opponents have accused Saied of seeking to extend his one-man rule and unilaterally rebuild the political system.

Noureddine Taboubi, head of the powerful UGTT trades union, criticized the lack of a vision for tackling the country's pressing social and economic woes.

In a speech to union members, he said the union had supported Saied's July 25 moves but that "we didn't give (him) a blank cheque."

Yet some in Tunis welcomed Saied's latest move.

Nizar ben Ahmida, a 37-year-old teacher, stressed the importance of announcing a timeline.

Tunis resident Nidhal said the election date was too far away.

Saied said a consultation on constitutional reforms would be launched on January 1, via custom-built electronic platforms.

These proposals would then be examined by a committee of experts appointed by the president, before being put to referendum.

But former Ennahdha MP Samir Dilou said the idea would "make Tunisia an object of ridicule."

"The street isn't reassured. The economic situation is what concerns the Tunisian public," said Jourchi.



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[Iran losing 'precious time' with nuclear stance: European diplomats](#)

Tue, 2021-12-14 01:55

PARIS: Iran's positions in talks over its nuclear development programme are "inconsistent" with the terms of the deal to limit it, diplomats from the western European countries negotiating with Tehran, said on Monday. After a five-month pause, talks resumed on salvaging the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna on November 29. The 2015 agreement aimed to prevent Iran from developing an atomic bomb, a goal Tehran has always denied. The deal ensured sanctions relief in return for tight curbs on Iran's nuclear programme, which was put under extensive UN

monitoring.

Diplomats from Iran, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, the signatory countries to the 2015 agreement, are attending the current talks. "We have had many hours of engagement, and all delegations have pressed Iran to be reasonable," said the diplomats, from Britain, France and Germany. "As of this moment, we still have not been able to get down to real negotiations," they added.

"We are losing precious time dealing with new Iranian positions inconsistent with the JCPOA or that go beyond it."

Donald Trump pulled the US out of the accord in 2018 and US President Joe Biden wants to negotiate Washington's return, with US diplomats participating at one remove from the main talks.

Iran wants Washington to lift a raft of sanctions, and is asking as well for guarantees.

On Sunday, Iran's chief negotiator at the talks, Ali Bagheri, reported progress on drawing up an agenda.

"The two parties are at the point of agreeing on the matters which should be on the agenda," Tehran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri told the official IRNA news agency.

"It's a positive and important evolution since, at the start, they weren't even in agreement on the issues to negotiate."

Iranian officials maintain they are serious about committing to the talks. But the Western countries have accused Tehran of having backtracked on the position it held earlier this year.

Last week, Biden warned that the United States was preparing "additional measures" against Iran as expectations grow that the talks are set to fail.



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G7 says Iran must stop nuclear escalation Vienna talks on Iran nuclear deal resume amid tensions

Tunisia's president says he will call constitutional referendum, elections next year

Author:

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Mon, 2021-12-13 00:38

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied said on Monday he would call a constitutional referendum next July, a year to the day after he seized broad powers in moves his opponents call a coup, and that parliamentary elections would follow at the end of 2022.

Laying out the timeline for his proposed political changes in a televised speech, Saied said the referendum would take place on July 25, following an online public consultation that will start in January.

Saied's announcement of a road map out of the crisis has been awaited since he suspended parliament, dismissed the prime minister and assumed executive authority.

While those moves appeared very popular after years of economic stagnation and political paralysis, opposition to his stance has sharpened, including from political parties and other major domestic players that were initially supportive.

The delay in detailing the path forward, and the two months it took Saied to name a new prime minister, have added to concerns about Tunisia's ability to address an urgent crisis in its public finances.

The referendum date is Tunisia's Republic Day and the anniversary of his sudden intervention, which has cast doubt on the North African country's democratic gains since the 2011 revolution that triggered the "Arab spring" revolts.

Saied in September brushed aside most of the 2014 democratic constitution to say he could rule by decree during a period of exceptional measures, and promised a dialogue on further changes.

He said in Monday's speech that parliament would remain suspended until Tunisians vote for a replacement assembly on Dec. 17, 2022, the date he has declared to be the official anniversary of the revolution.

The anniversary had previously been marked on Jan. 14, the date when autocratic ruler Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, after agreement among political factions and civil society groups that took part in the uprising.

"We want to correct the paths of the revolution and history," Saied said in

his speech, after lambasting critics of his intervention. Saied said he would appoint a committee of experts to draft a new constitution, to be ready by June ahead of the referendum. A clear pathway to ordinary constitutional order may be important for Tunisia to secure international financial assistance as it struggles to finance its fiscal deficit and next year's budget as well as debt repayments. It has opened talks with the International Monetary Fund, but major donors have indicated they are not willing to step in without what they have called an "inclusive" approach. There was no immediate comment from Ennahda, the biggest party in parliament, or from the powerful UGTT labor union. Mohammed Abou, a former minister, said in a televised interview that Saied's "violation of the constitution" amounted to a coup.



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