

Haftar offers support to Libya's peace process

Sat, 2021-02-13 02:01

BENGHAZI: Libya's eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar has offered his backing for a peace process that seeks to end a decade of chaos, after meeting the head of a new transitional presidential council.

The military commander met with Mohammed Younes Menfi, a former diplomat who also comes from eastern Libya, and who was selected last week in a UN-backed process to head the three-member presidency council.

Haftar offered "the support of the armed forces for the peace process, to defend democracy and the peaceful transfer of power," a statement from his office read.

The meeting took place as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin said Turkish troops stationed in Libya will remain there as long as a bilateral military agreement between Ankara and Tripoli is active and Libya's government requests it.

Libya has been torn by civil war since a NATO-backed uprising led to the toppling and killing of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

The country has in recent years been split between a Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, and an eastern-based administration, backed by Haftar.

Erdogan said on Tuesday that Turkey would discuss withdrawing its troops, who Ankara says are providing military training to GNA if other foreign powers are withdrawn first.

FASTFACT

Turkish troops stationed in Libya will remain there as long as a bilateral military agreement between Ankara and Tripoli is active and Libya's government requests it, presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said.

In an interview with state broadcaster TRT Haber, Kalin said Turkish companies would also play an active role in the efforts to rebuild Libya, adding that Ankara would provide support to the newly elected interim government.

Menfi landed at Benina airport in the eastern Libyan port city Benghazi from Greece on Thursday and went straight to meet Haftar at his headquarters at Rajma, some 25 km outside town.

A new interim executive was chosen on Feb. 5 by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Switzerland, comprising 75 participants selected by the UN to represent a broad cross-section of society.

Haftar reiterated a recent pledge of support for the leaders of this new executive authority, who were chosen "so that they can reunite the institutions and lead the country to elections," Thursday's statement read.

Haftar's spokesman Ahmad Al-Mesmari had on Saturday congratulated Menfi and Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, who was selected as interim prime minister, alongside "the Libyan people," on the outcome of the selection process. The prime minister of the outgoing GNA, Fayez Al-Sarraj, has wished the new executive "success in their mission." The interim authority is mandated to lead Libya through to elections scheduled for December.



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Libya's interim leader arrives in key eastern city
New UN envoy holds talks with Libyan officials

[Fresh Tunisia protests break out in southern region](#)

Sat, 2021-02-13 01:36

TATAOUINE: Dozens of Tunisian youths on Friday blocked roads in the long-marginalized southern Tataouine region in anger over unkept government promises to provide work and investment. In November last year, the administration of Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi

pledged to create hundreds of jobs and a fund to launch economic projects in Tataouine after talks with union leaders and protesters after a months-long blockade of an oil installation.

Three months later, the protest movement launched further demonstrations, saying concrete measures had not materialized.

On Friday, some protesters burned tires and chanted slogans while others made businesses and institutions shut and take part in the demonstration, which has been criticized by some residents, an AFP correspondent said.

FASTFACT

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On Thursday, the army intervened to stop a dozen protesters from accessing the El-Kamour oil production site and blockading a pipeline, the protest movement said on its Facebook page.

The pipeline carries half of the crude produced by Tunisia's modest oil sector and has been blocked several times, notably in 2017 by sit-ins that devolved into clashes with security forces.

Tataouine already suffered over 30 percent unemployment, one of the highest rates in the country, while poverty is around 17.8 percent.

The coronavirus pandemic has wiped out thousands of informal jobs and strangled illicit cross-border trading networks with Libya and Algeria that bring vital income to many of the region's households.

The latest protests come as Mechichi is at odds with President Kais Saied over a proposed Cabinet reshuffle.



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Tunisian film pioneer
Moufida Tlatli dies aged 73

[Biden starts off tough on Turkey, with rocky path ahead](#)

Author:

Shaun TANDON | AFP

ID:

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Fri, 2021-02-12 16:33

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden has opened his presidency by taking a visibly harder line on Turkey, with analysts expecting a rocky path ahead between the uneasy allies as their interests increasingly diverge.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, like many of the leaders who wooed Biden's predecessor Donald Trump, is getting an early cold shoulder from Biden, who before being elected described the president an autocrat and promised to empower the opposition.

Biden has not called Erdogan and the new administration has immediately rebuked Turkey, urging the release of prominent civil society leader Osman

Kavala and criticizing homophobic rhetoric in a crackdown on student demonstrators.

The statements are in line with Biden's vow to put a new priority on democracy promotion, but the United States and Turkey have plenty of other disputes likely to exacerbate tensions.

Erdogan defiantly bought Russia's advanced S-400 missile system, brushing aside warnings that it was jeopardizing its role in the NATO alliance, leading Trump to impose narrow sanctions on the Turkish defense industry in the face of outrage in the US Congress.

And a New York court in May will start a trial of Turkey's state-run Halkbank over allegedly evading sanctions on Iran, potentially inflicting a heavy economic blow on Turkey.

"Relations can improve for the better, but I think people will have to temper their expectations," said Steven Cook, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

"Turkey and the United States have different interests and do not share values. The two countries can work together on some issues, but there is nothing that binds them together any longer."

Gonul Tol, director of the Turkey program at the Washington-based Middle East Institute, said that the S-400s posed an especially knotty problem as Erdogan had cast the purchase in nationalist terms, saying Ankara was asserting independence.

But Erdogan, she said, is under pressure over a struggling economy and has an interest in avoiding more wide-ranging US sanctions if he moves further on the S-400s.

"I think he's realizing that he's very isolated in the region and that his whole anti-Western, anti-US rhetoric is not working for him," Tol said. After Biden took office, Turkey proposed a compromise in which it does not fully operate the S-400s, but the State Department insisted that its ally not "retain" the multibillion-dollar system that NATO fears will help Russia hone its ability to shoot down Western jets.

Yet Tol said that Biden, despite his emphasis on democracy, was also pragmatic. She pointed to his early stance on Russia in which the administration has been forthright on concerns but also extended the New START nuclear reduction treaty.

"I think there are several camps in the Biden administration and some might say, let's see how Turkey behaves on issues critical to the US such as the S-400s, the Eastern Mediterranean and Nagorno-Karabakh," she said, referring to heightened tension between Turkey and fellow NATO ally Greece and Ankara's support for Azerbaijan's offensive to retake land held by Armenia.

"If there is a sign that they can actually cooperate with Turkey on matters that are important to national security, then I think we could see a softer approach overall," Tol said.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his confirmation hearing pointedly called Turkey "our so-called strategic partner," although State Department spokesman Ned Price has since described Turkey as a "longstanding and valued NATO ally."

"We seek cooperation on common priorities and, as with any ally, we engage in dialogue to address disagreements," Price told reporters.

He pointed to shared interest in ending Syria's civil war. But Syria has been a persistent source of friction since Biden's former boss Barack Obama

aligned with Kurdish fighters – linked to separatists inside Turkey – to defeat Daesh.

The Eurasia Group in an analysis said that both Turkey and the United States had an interest in improving ties but put a 60 percent probability on talks breaking down in the second half of 2021, most likely over the S-400s or Syria.

In an essay, Galip Dalay, a non-resident fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, expected US-Turkish tensions to fester, saying the two nations had different views on what resetting the relationship meant.

For Biden, he wrote, a reset means restoring a US-led liberal international order in which Turkey reverses its growing ties with Russia and a rising China.

But for Erdogan, “a reset means that the US would come to terms with the new geopolitical reality in Turkey’s neighborhood, including Turkey’s role in it.”



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Opposition Turkish lawmaker regains seat after jail Turkey’s Syria strategy in doubt after US policy shift

Iranian official arrested in Istanbul over dissident's killing

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Fri, 2021-02-12 18:13

ISTANBUL: Turkey has arrested an Iranian official suspected of instigating the killing of an Iranian dissident in Istanbul 15 months ago, sources familiar with the matter said on Friday.

Confirming a report in Turkey's Sabah newspaper, the sources said Mohammad Reza Naserzadeh was detained earlier this week on suspicion of planning the shooting of Masoud Molavi Vardanjani, a critic of Iran's political and military leadership.

The case could strain ties between Iran and Turkey, regional powers which have grown closer under Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan despite sometimes deep differences, including in Syria where they back opposing sides in the 10-year conflict.

Iran's Foreign Ministry said the newspaper report was "baseless."

Vardanjani was shot dead on an Istanbul street in November 2019, a year after leaving Iran and criticizing what he said was corruption in the Islamic Republic in a series of social media posts.

Last year two senior Turkish officials told Reuters his killing was instigated by intelligence officials at Iran's consulate in Istanbul. A senior US administration official also said Washington believed Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security was directly involved.

At the time, one of the Turkish officials identified the two suspects by initials – one set of which matched Naserzadeh's.

Sabah said Naserzadeh was working at the civic registry department of the Iranian consulate in Istanbul but Reuters was not able to independently confirm that element of its report.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh denied that any consulate staff member was involved in Vardanjani's killing and said Iran was in talks with Turkish officials to shed light on the issue, according to the foreign ministry's website.

In December, Turkish officials accused Iranian authorities of targeting another opponent in Istanbul when they announced they had detained 11 people involved in the abduction and smuggling to Iran of an Iranian dissident wanted in connection with a deadly attack in southwestern Iran.

Habib Chaab, an Iranian ethnic Arab separatist leader, was drugged and kidnapped by a network working "on behalf of Iran's intelligence service" after being lured into flying to Turkey by an Iranian intelligence operative, a senior official said.

Last week an Iranian diplomat accused of planning to bomb a meeting of an exiled opposition group was sentenced to 20 years in prison by a court in Belgium, the first trial of an Iranian official for suspected terrorism in Europe since Iran's 1979 revolution.



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Dissident politician and journalist severely beaten in Ankara

[Algerian president returns from Germany after post-Covid surgery](#)

Fri, 2021-02-12 20:45

ALGIERS: Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune returned home Friday after a one-month stay in Germany for surgery following post-Covid-19 complications in his foot, state television said.

"The President of the Republic, Supreme Chief of the Armed Forces and Minister of Defence, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, returned today," the state broadcaster said, but did not broadcast images of his arrival.

Tebboune, 75, had been hospitalised in Germany last year after contracting Covid-19, and stayed there for two months before returning to Algeria. He returned to Germany on January 10, and underwent a “successful” operation on his foot 10 days later, according to the presidency.

Algeria has recorded over 110,000 cases including over 2,900 deaths from Covid-19 since the pandemic began.

On the eve of his return, Tebboune had called German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to thank him for the medical care he had received.

Among the key issues that await him include the development of the new electoral law ahead of anticipated local and legislative elections slated to be held by the end of the year.

A government reshuffle is also expected.

Tebboune won office in December 2019, eight months after the popular Hirak protest movement swept out his ailing predecessor Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Tebboune’s initial convalescence in Germany had reminded many Algerians of octogenarian Bouteflika’s frequent hospitalisations abroad.

Tebboune’s return comes amid tension in the North African nation ahead of the second anniversary of the launch of the Hirak protests on February 22.

Hirak protesters continued after Bouteflika’s fall, demanding a full overhaul of the ruling system in place since the Algeria’s 1962 independence from France.

However, social distancing rules to stem the coronavirus pandemic meant that protesters had to halt their street rallies early last year.



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