

Turkish parliament approves controversial oversight law

Sun, 2020-12-27 20:53

ANKARA: Turkey's parliament on Sunday approved a controversial law approving the oversight of associations and foundations, which critics say will stifle NGOs and damage civil society.

It gives the state the power to replace the boards of NGOs with trustees, as well as suspending their operations and having civil servants carry out annual monitoring.

The assets and online donation campaigns of NGOs could be blocked after inspections as a way to prevent money laundering and prevent terrorism financing.

Dunja Mijatovic, who is the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, last week voiced her concerns about the legislation. She said it would allow the state to restrict civil society activism in the country and target critical voices.

She tweeted on Dec. 22: "The Turkish Parliament should discontinue attempts to introduce legislation further restricting legitimate NGO activities, including replacement of NGO leaders facing investigations under anti-terror laws with gov-appointed trustees and restrictions on fund-raising activities."

The new law also allows the interior minister to replace members of organisations who are being investigated on terror charges.

However, terror charges in Turkey are often arbitrary and target dissidents as a way to quash civil society activists, journalists and politicians. Hundreds of NGOs launched a petition to prevent the bill from passing, warning that it would "destroy civil society" in Turkey.

Turkish philanthropist and civil society figure Osman Kavala was acquitted earlier this year of terror-related charges for allegedly organizing and financing anti-government protests in Gezi in 2013. But he was quickly re-arrested over alleged links to a failed coup attempt in 2016 and military espionage.

Lawmaker Alpay Antmen, from the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP), said the new legislation went against several articles of the constitution, especially regarding the right to privacy and the right to property, as well as against several international conventions that Turkey was a signatory to.

"Here the main target is to get the authority to appoint trustees to all dissident civil groups. It is crystal-clear," he told Arab News.

Antmen said the law would give civil servants the power to close NGOs without waiting for the judicial process to be completed.

“The courts are generally giving politically motivated rulings without respecting the constitution. Turkish rulers keep branding all dissident figures as terrorists just because they don’t support them. Opposition women’s rights associations, human rights groups and all similar civil society groups can now be closed with just one signature. As the trials will endure for years, their assets will be frozen for long years.”

Antmen, who is a lawyer by training, believed that Turkey’s handful of democratic, secular and progressive civil society actors had lost all judicial guarantees to maintain their once vibrant existence in the country thanks to this new law.

“It is unfortunately the beginning of the end for the civil society presence in Turkey.”

A European ruling that was critical about the jailed Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas and ordered his release led Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to say that the government did not abide by the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, even though the country has been a member of this court for decades.

“The ECHR could not pass judgment in the place of Turkish courts,” he said on Dec. 23.



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Turkey warns Libya's Haftar and supporters against attacking its forces
Eastern Turkey shook by 5.3 magnitude earthquake

Top Egypt officials visit Libya capital for first time in years

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Sun, 2020-12-27 16:38

TRIPOLI: Senior Egyptian security officials visited the Libyan capital Tripoli for the first time in years on Sunday and held talks with officials from the Government of National Accord (GNA), the Libyan interior ministry said.

The visit was the first for senior Egyptian officials to Tripoli since 2014 when the country entered a civil war between the GNA, based in the capital, and the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar. Tripoli's government is backed by Turkey while LNA is backed by Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

Libya descended into chaos after the NATO-backed overthrow of leader Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, and Egypt is concerned about instability in its neighbor and Turkey's support for Tripoli forces.

GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha and Head of the Intelligence Service Emad Trabelsi discussed "ways to support the cease-fire agreement and discuss the outputs of the 5+5 committee" with the Egyptian delegation, the Libyan interior ministry said in a statement.

It was referring to a truce agreed on in late October between Libyan warring factions and the so-called 5+5 meetings, involving five senior officers appointed by each side.

Bashagha, who visited Cairo last month, said on twitter that the meeting was "fruitful and constructive" and described the relations with Cairo as "very important."

The Egyptian delegation includes deputy head of the intelligence service and top officials from the foreign and defense ministries, an Egyptian intelligence source told Reuters.

The delegation also met GNA Foreign Minister Mohamed Taher Siala and promised to reopen the Egyptian embassy in Tripoli "at the earliest time," said Mohamed Elgeblawi, the GNA foreign ministry spokesman on Twitter.

The visiting officials would inspect the Egyptian embassy in Tripoli which has been closed since 2014, Egyptian state newspaper Ahram reported.

The two sides also agreed on taking steps toward resuming Libyan flights to

Cairo, Elgeblawi said.



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Turkey warns Libya's Haftar and supporters against attacking its forces
Turkish defence minister in Libya to discuss cooperation

[At least eight climbers killed in Iran, ship crew missing after snowfall and storms](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2020-12-26 17:12

DUBAI: At least eight climbers have died and several more are missing in mountains north of Iran's capital Tehran after heavy snowfall and a blizzard, state television reported on Saturday, and the seven crew of a ship are also missing after storms in the Gulf.

Heavy snow and winds in several parts of Iran in the last days have closed many roads and disrupted transport.

Several climbers remain unaccounted for since Friday when two deaths were

reported, while the number reported as missing has increased as concerned families contact the authorities, the broadcaster said.

Local news agency reports said the number of people unaccounted for on three popular trails could be as high as 12.

Tehran lies at the foot of the Alborz mountain range which has several ski resorts.

Separately, Iranian maritime authorities were searching for the seven crew members of an Iranian transport vessel that capsized in rough Gulf waters on Friday, the semi-official ISNA news agency reported.

"We are trying to find the missing by mobilising all our facilities and forces, and informing passing vessels and the naval search and rescue centres of Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan," Esmail Makkizadeh, deputy head of Iran's regional maritime body, was quoted as saying by ISNA.



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Turkish-Israeli rapprochement: Dream or reality?

Sat, 2020-12-26 21:04

ANKARA: After years of minimal and sour relations between Turkey and Israel, Ankara is set to extend an olive branch to Tel Aviv and improve bilateral diplomatic ties.

"Our relations with Israel in the intelligence field have not ceased anyway; they are still continuing," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Dec. 25, following reports that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has offered his mediation.

Recently, Erdogan's Adviser Mesut Hakki Casin said that Turkey could again buy weapons from Israel to strengthen cooperation between Turkish and Israeli defense industries.

Intelligence talks resumed between the two sides, and while commercial ties still continue, both countries expelled their ambassadors in May 2018 over the killing of dozens of Palestinians by Israeli forces along the Gaza border and the US decision to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem.

Erdogan said Turkey had some issues with "people at the top level" in Israel, adding that Palestine still constitutes Turkey's red line and that it was impossible for Ankara to accept Israel's "merciless" policies for the Palestinian territories.

The Mavi Marmara incident, which involved the raid of a Gaza-bound flotilla carrying humanitarian aid for Palestinians in 2010, resulted in a serious crisis for Turkish-Israeli relations that took almost a decade to recover despite US mediation.

As a serious stumbling block to the normalization of relations, Israel accuses Turkey of granting passports to members of Hamas in Istanbul. For its part, Ankara keeps criticizing the recent rapprochement between Israel and Gulf countries.

Experts do not anticipate a real improvement of bilateral ties before the outcome of Israeli elections in March 2021.

Dr. Selin Nasi, a researcher on Turkey-Israel relations from Bogazici University in Istanbul, thinks the two countries might exchange ambassadors in the future, perhaps after the Israeli elections in March.

"However, one has to distinguish between the prospective restoration of diplomatic relations and a genuine lasting normalization of bilateral ties. For the latter, rebuilding mutual trust becomes essential. This requires time as much as a recalibration of policies," she told Arab News.

According to Aydin Sezer, an Ankara-based Middle East expert, Turkey intends

to reduce the number of its “foes” on the international scene.

“The election of Joe Biden to the US presidency has been an opportunity to repair ties. With this Israeli move, Turkey wants to reach out to the Jewish lobby in the US to get their unconditional support,” he told Arab News.

“A normalization in Turkish-Israeli relations would also send a message to Tehran to watch its step in the region,” Sezer added.

Ufuk Ulutas, the potential ambassador, is not a career diplomat. He has worked as the director of the pro-government think-tank SETA as an expert on Iran, studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and is known as a pro-Palestinian figure.

Speculations in Israel and Turkey are running high with regard to the serious problems that Ulutas might face in receiving diplomatic approval from the Israeli government because of his anti-Israel views, which he has voiced in the past in different TV interviews and written reports.

Turkey’s choice in Ulutas has been interpreted by the Israeli press as a “continuation of Ankara’s provocation policy.”

Appointing a professional diplomat to this post has been always the tradition in bilateral relations until the Mavi Marmara crisis and was seen as a gesture to show the importance that is accorded to the relations.

Soner Cagaptay of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy thinks Erdogan’s remarks on Friday signal that Turkey wants to end its complete isolation in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, as it has almost no friends or allies in the region.

“There is also an Eastern Mediterranean angle in this willingness for rapprochement,” he told Arab News.

The energy and defense cooperation between Egypt, Greece and Israel might create a challenging atmosphere for Turkish moves in the region.

“Turkey feels the need to break Israel from this alliance that excludes Turkey,” Cagaptay said.

“There is a perception in Ankara that Erdogan’s charm offensive toward Biden is to provide a sweetener to the US as Israel is America’s closest ally in the Middle East. This driver seems also to be behind Erdogan’s desire to normalization,” he added.

Nasi thinks that the emergence of the EastMed Gas Forum in the Mediterranean as well as Israel’s normalization of relations with Gulf countries proves the limits of Ankara’s identity-based foreign policy.

“By normalizing relations with Israel, Ankara is primarily hoping to divide the power bloc in the Mediterranean, at best weaken what she perceives to be a hostile axis to constrain her. Rapprochement with Israel might also help Turkey to win Washington’s ear again, neutralizing the opposition,” she said.

However, Cagaptay is not sure that Israel will completely and immediately reciprocate.

"Nowadays, Israel is normalized in regional relations, in contrast to ten years ago. It has many friends. It will not immediately embrace Erdogan. They will remain lukewarm, and they will not be jumping to the conclusion that they will have full-fledged ties with Turkey anytime soon," he said.

"Turkey's ties with Hamas will also be an obstacle before the normalization."

Nasi agrees, also skeptical about whether Turkey is willing at this stage to compromise on the issue of providing support to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which constitutes one of the main obstacles hindering reconciliation from Israel's view.

"A long-lasting normalization between Turkey and Israel requires the redefinition of bilateral ties on the basis of common geopolitical interests, downplaying ideological preferences," she said.

For Nasi, there is still no clear indicator that Ankara is changing course.

"Turkish rulers seem to be after an easy victory, set for maximum gains at minimum costs. It is hard to reconcile normalization efforts with reports that suggest Turkey is allegedly granting passports to Hamas members or releasing of videos with a message of liberating Jerusalem," she said.

"At the end of the day, messages addressed to a domestic audience are always being monitored by international public opinion."



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Israeli strikes on Syria kill 6 Iran-backed fighters, says watchdog

Turkish defence minister in Libya to discuss cooperation

Sat, 2020-12-26 20:12

TRIPOLI: Turkey's Defence Minister Hulusi Akar made a surprise trip to Libya on Saturday, two days after strongman Khalifa Haftar urged his fighters to drive out Turkish forces from the oil-rich country.

The Turkish defence ministry said Akar would inspect Turkish forces in Libya during the visit, while Libyan officials said talks would focus on military cooperation between Tripoli and Ankara.

Turkey has backed the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) with military advisers, material and mercenaries against an offensive last year by the eastern-based Haftar.

Ankara also has a large military base in Al-Watiya region on Libya's border with Tunisia.

Akar's visit to Tripoli also came after the Turkish parliament this week adopted a motion extending the deployment of forces in Libya by 18 months. Upon landing in the Libyan capital, Akar held talks with his counterpart Salah Eddine Namrouch and then met Khaled El-Mechri, who heads the High State Council aligned with the GNA, an HSC statement said.

The Turkish and Libyan officials agreed during the talks to "pursue their coordination in a bid to repel any hostile" action by Haftar that could destabilise Libya, the statement added.

Turkish support for the GNA helped stave off the April 2019 offensive by Haftar.

During a speech on Thursday, Haftar said there would be "no peace in the presence of a coloniser on our land" and called on his forces to "get ready". "We will therefore take up arms again to fashion our peace with our own hands... and, since Turkey rejects peace and opts for war, prepare to drive out the occupier by faith, will and weapons," he said.

Libya was thrown into chaos after a 2011 NATO-backed uprising toppled and led to the killing of long-time dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

Wracked by violence since then, the North African country has become a battleground for tribal militias, extremists and mercenaries and a major gateway for desperate migrants bound for Europe.

Two rival camps now vie for power, with an eastern-based administration – backed by Haftar – pitted against the Tripoli-based GNA.

But in October the two sides struck a ceasefire agreement, which has been generally respected, setting the stage for elections at the end of next year. On Saturday, the GNA's defence minister Namrouch told local media that Libya

was striving to build a military institution that respects international norms.

“The Turks have helped the GNA and we thank them for that. But now we wish to reorganise the Libyan army and inject new blood into it,” he said.

Later Saturday, Akar is expected to attend a graduation ceremony in Tripoli for military cadets who were trained in Turkey as part of the cooperation with the GNA, Libyan defence ministry sources told AFP.



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