

Erdogan hosts Putin, Rouhani for Syria summit

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Raziye Akkoc and Maria Panina | AFP

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ANKARA: The latest summit on Syria hosted by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara with his Russian and Iranian counterparts started on Monday, with attention focused on Damascus's push on the last rebel-held bastion of Idlib.

Presidents Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani met Erdogan for separate bilateral talks in the Turkish capital before they sat down together for their fifth summit on the conflict since 2017.

Iran and Russia have been staunch supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while Turkey has called for his ouster and backed opposition fighters. But with Assad's position looking increasingly secure, Turkey's priority has shifted to preventing a mass influx of refugees from Idlib into Syria's northwest.

"We are in complete agreement in aiming for a lasting political solution for Syria's political unity and territorial integrity," Erdogan said in a televised statement as the summit began.

Turkey is concerned over the steady advance of Syrian forces into the region, backed by Russian airpower, despite a series of ceasefires.

Turkey has 12 observation posts in Idlib to enforce a buffer zone agreement struck a year ago with Russia to prevent a full-scale Syrian offensive.

But the posts look increasingly threatened, with one of them cut off from the rest of Idlib when Syrian forces advanced last month.

Russian airstrikes have continued in the region despite the latest ceasefire agreed by Ankara and Moscow on August 31.

"A zone of de-escalation should not serve as a terrain for armed provocations," Putin said as the summit began.

"We must take supplementary measures to completely destroy the terrorist menace that comes from the zone of Idlib."

The Turkish presidency said the leaders would discuss the latest developments in Syria as well as "ensuring the necessary conditions for the voluntary return of refugees and discussing the joint step to be taken in the period ahead with the aim of achieving a lasting political solution."

Moscow is keen to see progress on establishing a constitutional committee to oversee the next stage of the political settlement in Syria.

That would give Putin a political win to add to the military victories, said Daren Khalifa, senior Syria analyst at International Crisis Group.

After his meeting with Rouhani, Putin said he hoped they were "now in the final stages" of forming the constitutional committee.

But Khalifa said expectations should remain low.

Even if they can agree on who will form the committee, "this leaves a crux of issues unaddressed for the future of the political process including the

regime's ability and willingness to undertake any kind of political reform," she told AFP.

High on everyone's mind at the summit was the weekend attack on Saudi oil facilities, which Washington has blamed on Tehran, deepening bilateral tensions and putting the region on the brink of further conflict.

Iran has been a crucial actor on the battlefield in Syria but has kept a lower profile in recent months. Its focus has been on countering Israeli and US involvement.

"The presence of American military forces in a United Nations member and independent country such as Syria endangers its territorial integrity and national sovereignty," Rouhani said at the start of the summit.

"American forces should leave the country at once."

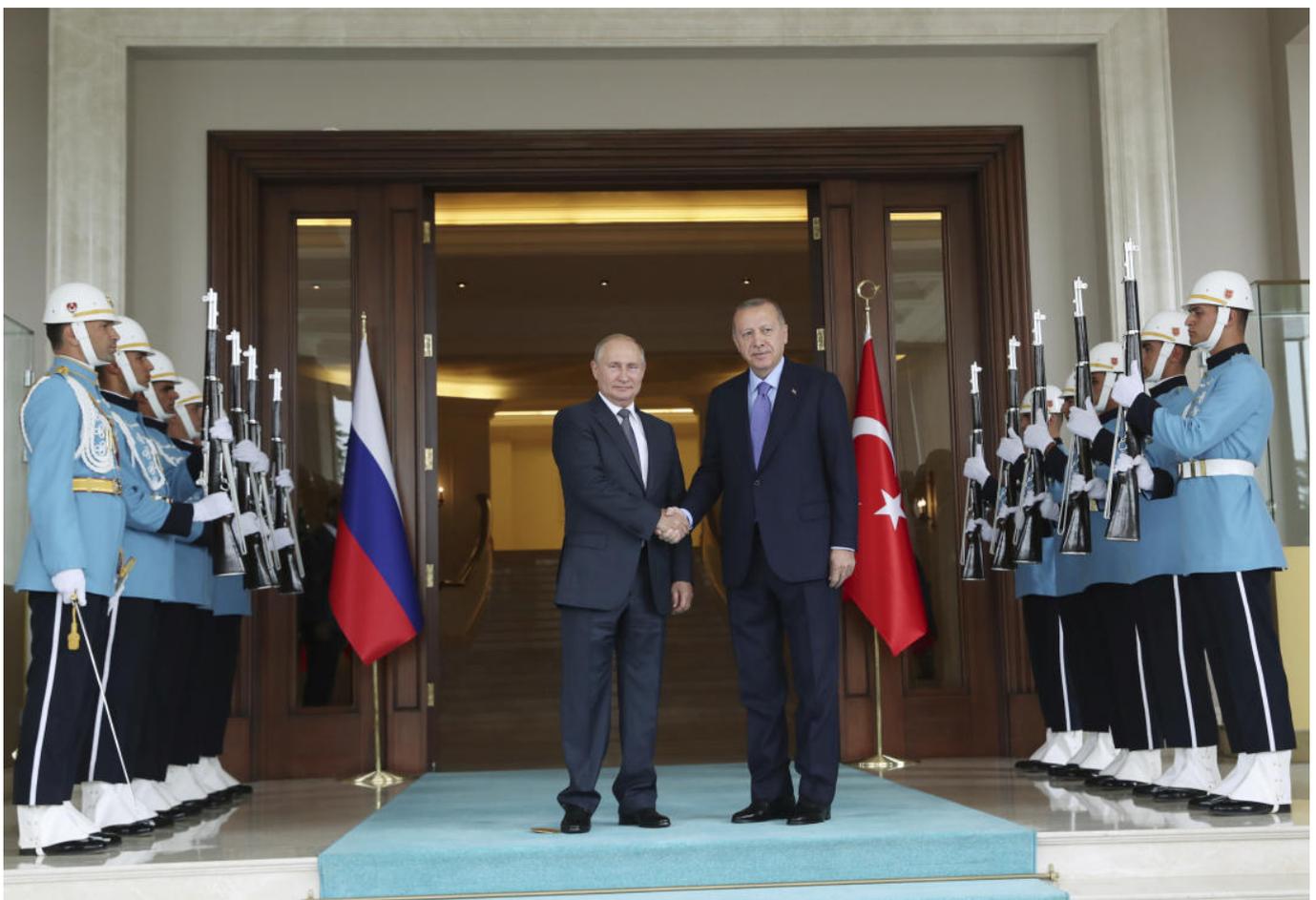
Meanwhile, Turkey has other concerns regarding Syria.

It has repeatedly threatened to launch a cross-border offensive against Syrian Kurdish forces, whom it sees as allied to Kurdish militants in its own territory.

That has strained Turkey's relations with its NATO ally, the United States, which backs the Syrian Kurds as the main fighting force against the Islamic State group (IS).

The US has vowed to work with Turkey to move Kurdish forces away from its border, but Ankara says progress has so far been "cosmetic" and it could launch an operation into Syria by the end of this month.

Turkey has conducted previous offensives against IS in 2016 and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia in 2018.



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Coalition says 'good progress' in north Syria buffer zone, thousands return to government-seized areas
Saudi aid agency continues projects in Syria, Comoros, Yemen

[Israeli PM vows to annex 'all the settlements' in West Bank](#)

Author:

By TIA GOLDENBERG | AP

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Mon, 2019-09-16 12:28

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed Monday to annex "all the settlements" in the West Bank, including an enclave deep in the heart of the largest Palestinian city, in a last-ditch move that appeared aimed at shoring up nationalist support the day before a do-over election. Locked in a razor tight race and with legal woes hanging over him, Netanyahu is fighting for his political survival. In the final weeks of his campaign he has been doling out hard-line promises meant to draw more voters to his Likud party and re-elect him in Tuesday's unprecedented repeat vote.

"I intend to extend sovereignty on all the settlements and the (settlement) blocs," including "sites that have security importance or are important to Israel's heritage," Netanyahu said in an interview with Israeli Army Radio, part of an eleventh-hour media blitz.

Asked if that included the hundreds of Jews who live under heavy military guard amid tens of thousands of Palestinians in the volatile city of Hebron, Netanyahu responded "of course."

Israelis head to the polls Tuesday in the second election this year, after Netanyahu failed to cobble together a coalition following April's vote, sparking the dissolution of parliament.

Netanyahu has made a series of ambitious pledges in a bid to whip up support, including a promise to annex the Jordan Valley, an area even moderate Israelis view as strategic but which the Palestinians consider the breadbasket of any future state.

To protest that announcement, the Palestinian Authority held a Cabinet meeting in the Jordan Valley village of Fasayil on Monday, a day after Israel's Cabinet met elsewhere in the valley.

"The Jordan Valley is part of Palestinian lands and any settlement or annexation is illegal," Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said at the start of the meeting. "We will sue Israel in international courts for exploiting our

land and we will continue our struggle against the occupation on the ground and in international forums.”

Critics contend that Netanyahu’s pledges, if carried out, would enflame the Middle East and eliminate any remaining Palestinian hope of establishing a separate state. His political rivals have dismissed his talk of annexation as an election ploy noting that he has refrained from annexing any territory during his more than a decade in power.

Israel captured the West Bank and east Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 war. Over 2.5 million Palestinians now live in occupied territories, in addition to nearly 700,000 Jewish settlers. Israel already has annexed east Jerusalem in a move that is not internationally recognized. The international community, along with the Palestinians, overwhelmingly considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem illegal.

Tuesday’s vote will largely be a referendum on Netanyahu, who this year surpassed Israel’s founding prime minister as the country’s longest-serving leader.

He has cast himself as the only candidate capable of facing Israel’s myriad challenges. But his opponents say his legal troubles – including a recommendation by the attorney general to indict him on bribery, fraud and breach of trust charges – loom too large for him to carry on.



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Embattled Israeli PM fights for survival in do-over election Embattled Israeli

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Algerian PM to resign, paving way for vote after protracted protests
Algeria army chief wants presidential election in December

[Egypt says no 'breakthrough' with Ethiopia over Nile dam](#)

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Sun, 2019-09-15 16:41

CAIRO: Egypt says negotiations over an upstream Nile dam being built by Ethiopia have not led to any "breakthrough."

Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry told reporters that talks over the \$5 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam have stopped for more than a year before restarting in Cairo on Sunday.

The long-running dispute centers on the filling and operation of what will be Africa's largest hydroelectric dam.

Shoukry says he hopes that Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia can agree a timetable to reach a deal over the soon-to-be-completed dam.

Egypt fears the dam could reduce its share of the Nile River which serves as a lifeline for the country's 100 million people. Ethiopian maintains that the dam will help its development.

Shoukry says his county "respects Ethiopia's right to development" but "without affecting Egypt."



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[Pressure grows in US for firm response to Iran after Aramco attacks](#)

Sun, 2019-09-15 19:21

WASHINGTON: An American senator has called for Washington to consider an attack on Iranian oil facilities as pressure grows in the US for a firm response to the Saudi Aramco strikes.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed Iran for the drone attacks on Saturday against the Abqaiq oil processing plant and the Khurais oil field. He also suggested that unlike previous drone and missile attacks on the Kingdom, this one may not have been launched from Yemen by the Iran-backed Houthis. Reports

have said that the attack may have originated in Iraq where Iran also holds sway over a large number of powerful militias.

“It is now time for the US to put on the table an attack on Iranian oil refineries if they continue their provocations or increase nuclear enrichment,” Lindsey Graham, a Republican senator close to Donald Trump, said on Twitter.

Iran will not stop their misbehavior until the consequences become more real, like attacking their refineries, which will break the regime’s back.

– Lindsey Graham (@LindseyGrahamSC) [September 14, 2019](#)

“Iran will not stop their misbehavior until the consequences become more real, like attacking their refineries, which will break the regime’s back.”

Iran on Sunday denied it was behind the attack, but the Yemeni Houthi militia backed by Tehran, claimed they had launched them.

The White House on Sunday did not rule out a potential meeting between President Donald Trump and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, even after Washington accused Iran of being behind drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities.



White House adviser Kellyanne Conway said the attacks “did not help” prospects for a meeting between Trump and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani during the United Nations General Assembly this month but she left open the possibility it could happen.

“You’re not helping your case much,” by attacking Saudi Arabia, civilian areas and critical infrastructure that affects global energy markets.” Conway told the Fox News Sunday program.

The Trump administration’s sanctions and “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran over its nuclear and ballistic missile program will continue whether or not the two leaders meet, she added.

The US ramped up pressure on Iran last year after trump withdrew from an international pact to curb Iran’s nuclear program.

Washington has reimposed a tough sanctions regime on Tehran, which it accuses of hiding behind the nuclear deal to advance its missiles program and aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East.

Just spoke to [@SecPompeo](#) about this egregious attack on the security of Saudi Arabia. This was a reckless attempt to damage regional security and disrupt global oil supplies. The UK condemns such behaviour unreservedly.

– Dominic Raab (@DominicRaab) [September 15, 2019](#)

Meanwhile, condemnation of the attacks continued from around the world.

Kuwait's emir telephoned King Salman on Sunday to express his condemnation of the attack.

Secretary General Antonio Guterres condemned the attack and called upon all parties to exercise maximum restraint to prevent any escalation.

King Salman also received a telephone call from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas expressing his deep condemnation.

Abbas affirmed that the Palestinian government and people stand with the Kingdom to confront these terrorist acts of aggression.

UK foreign minister Dominic Raab said the attack was a “reckless attempt to damage regional security and disrupt global oil supplies.”

The European Union warned of a “real threat to regional security” in the Middle East.

*With Reuters



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Trump calls Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after drones attack Saudi Aramco plants
Iraq denies links to drone attack on Saudi oil facilities