

Qatar opens new coast guard base

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SEMAISIMA, Qatar: Qatar inaugurated its largest coast guard base Sunday as a standoff between Iran and the United States continues to boost tensions in strategic Gulf waters.

Prime Minister Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani and commander of US Naval Forces in the Middle East Vice Admiral Jim Malloy attended the ceremony at the Al-Daayen naval base in Semaisima, 30 kilometers from Doha on Qatar's eastern coast.

Qatar, a key US ally in the region, is home to Washington's largest Middle East military base. But Doha has come under pressure for its close ties to Iran.

Malloy, commander of the US Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain, said the new base was "a wonderful opportunity for us to interface more strongly with the Qatari coast guard."

Tensions in the Gulf – through which nearly a fifth of the world's oil is transported – have spiked in recent weeks, with the US blaming Iran for multiple attacks on tanker ships in the region and Tehran shooting down an American drone.

The 600,000-plus square-meter site aims to "facilitate the securing of all territorial waters of the State and border posts," the interior ministry wrote on Twitter.

It includes a "sophisticated seaport," training and medical facilities, civil defense offices and operating rooms, the ministry added.

Asked whether the base could enhance US-Qatari coordination on Iran, Malloy said the move was "all about maritime security, that's what our focus is." The US said Thursday it was discussing military escorts for vessels in the Gulf a day after armed Iranian boats allegedly threatened a British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.

And on Friday Britain said it was sending a second warship to the Gulf and raising the alert level in the oil-rich region after Iranian gunboats threatened a UK supertanker.



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Qatar says warplanes collide on training mission
US deploys F-22 stealth fighters to Qatar amid Iran tensions

[Algeria army arrests 5 on suspicion of planning 'attacks'](#)

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ALGIERS: The Algerian army has arrested five suspects for planning “attacks” against anti-government demonstrations that have swept the North African country since February 22, the defence ministry said on Sunday.

The suspects “planned attacks against peaceful protests across different parts of the country”, it said in a statement, adding they were arrested in “anti-terrorist” raids last week in the Batna region southeast of the capital Algiers.

It identified the suspects as “terrorists”, a term Algerian authorities use to describe armed Islamists who have been active in the country since the early 1990s.

Algeria has been rocked by months of protests since longtime leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced in February he would run for a fifth term.

He quit office but protesters have kept up the mass demonstrations, calling for an overhaul of the “system” and departure of key Bouteflika-era figures. Interim president Abdelkader Bensalah has proposed a “neutral” national dialogue, without the involvement of the state or the military, to prepare for new presidential polls.

His proposals, backed by powerful army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah who has emerged as the country’s key powerbroker since Bouteflika’s departure, have failed to calm protesters.

Massive rallies continue to be held weekly on Fridays in Algiers and other key towns.

In recent weeks, police have detained dozens of demonstrators – releasing them at the end of the Friday rallies.

Observers say the detentions and other measures including heavy police deployments are meant to discourage protesters from taking to the streets.



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European powers 'deeply troubled' by shipping attacks, warn nuclear deal could collapse

Sun, 2019-07-14 17:53

PARIS/DUBAI: France, Britain and Germany said on Sunday they were preoccupied by the escalation of tensions in the Arabian Gulf region and a risk of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal falling apart, calling for dialogue between all the parties to resume.

The European nations said in a joint statement that following renewed sanctions by the United States on Iran, and Iran's decision to no longer respect some of its obligations, the deal signed on this day four years ago could collapse.

"The risks are such that it is necessary for all stakeholders to pause, and consider the possible consequences of their actions," the joint statement released by the French president's office said.

"We believe that the time has come to act responsibly and to look for ways to stop the escalation of tension and resume dialogue.

"The risks are such that it is necessary that all the parties take a pause and think about the possible consequences of their actions," it added.

This comes as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in a televised speech on Sunday that Tehran is ready to hold talks with the United States if Washington lifts sanctions and returns to the 2015 nuclear deal it exited last year.

US President Donald Trump's administration says it is open to negotiations with Iran on a more far-reaching agreement on nuclear and security issues. But Iran has made any talks conditional on first being able to export as much oil as it did before the United States withdrew from the nuclear pact with world powers in May 2018.

"We have always believed in talks ... if they lift sanctions, end the imposed economic pressure and return to the deal, we are ready to hold talks with America today, right now and anywhere," Rouhani said in his Sunday speech. Confrontations between Washington and Tehran have escalated, culminating in a plan for US air strikes on Iran last month that Trump called off at the last minute.

In reaction to US sanctions, which have notably targeted Iran's main foreign revenue stream in the shape of crude oil exports, Tehran announced in May that it would scale back its commitments under the deal.

Defying a warning by the European parties to the pact to continue its full compliance, Tehran has amassed more low-enriched uranium than permitted and it has started to enrich uranium above the 3.67% permitted by the agreement.

"The risks are such that it is necessary for all stakeholders to pause, and consider the possible consequences of their actions," France, Britain and Germany, who have been trying to salvage the pact by shielding Tehran's economy from sanctions, said in their statement.

Iranian clerical rulers have said that Tehran will further decrease its

commitments if Europeans fail to fulfil their promises to guarantee Iran's interests under the deal.

The nuclear deal aimed to extend the amount of time it would theoretically take Iran to produce enough fissile material for an atomic bomb – so-called breakout time – from several months to a minimum of one year until 2025. Iran denies ever having considered developing atomic weapons.

Meanwhile, the US said it has granted a visa to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to attend a UN meeting in New York this week, two sources familiar with the matter said on Sunday, saying Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had approved the decision.

Had Pompeo not approved giving Zarif, Iran's top diplomat and nuclear negotiator, a US visa it could have been a signal that the United States was trying to further isolate the Islamic Republic.



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UK says seized Iranian oil tanker could be releasedIran wants resolution, not escalation: UK's Jeremy Hunt

Egyptian delegation seeks to prevent new Gaza flare-up

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RAMALLAH: Egyptian security officials have held talks with Palestinian leaders in recent days in part to prevent a new flare-up of tensions between Israel and the Gaza Strip, Palestinian officials said Sunday.

The Egyptian delegation led by deputy intelligence chief Ayman Badie was in the Gaza Strip on Friday and Saturday and the occupied West Bank on Saturday, the officials said.

A statement on Saturday from Hamas said the discussions included talks on "understandings with the enemy" – a reference to a fragile cease-fire with Israel tested in recent days.

Contacted on Sunday, a Hamas official said the movement did not want to comment further beyond its official statements.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas met with the delegation in Ramallah on Saturday on the Gaza-Israel cease-fire and attempts to heal the long-existing division between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah, official Palestinian news agency WAFA said.

Fresh tensions were feared after Israel shot dead a Hamas militant on Thursday along the border with the Gaza Strip, prompting the movement to vow revenge.

Israel later signalled it had fired in error, saying an initial inquiry showed soldiers misidentified a Hamas security agent as "an armed terrorist and fired as a result of this misunderstanding."

On Friday night, Israel's military said two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory, but no damage or injuries were reported.

Earlier in the day, at least 33 Palestinians were shot and wounded during weekly demonstrations and clashes along the Gaza-Israel border, according to the Hamas-run health ministry.

Under a fragile cease-fire brokered by Egyptian and UN officials following a severe flare-up in May, Israel is meant to ease aspects of its blockade on the strip in exchange for relative calm.

At least 295 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza since major Hamas-backed protests began along the border fence in March 2018.

Most were killed during the protests and clashes but others died in air strikes or tank fire in response to violence from the strip.

Six Israelis have been killed.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since 2008.



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Author:

Sat, 2019-07-13 22:34

BAGHDAD: Dismantling pro-Iranian armed factions operating in Iraq under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) and integrating its fighters with independent volunteers within the same body is at the heart of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's plan to institutionalize the PMC and limit Iran's control over its fighters.

The drive to "restructure and reorganize" the PMC's forces is Abdul Mahdi's response to pressure from the powerful Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ali Al-

Sistani, who sees these factions as a threat to the political process and a tool to undermine the authority of the state.

Sistani, global head of the Shiite community and the most revered cleric in Iraq, has been the sponsor of the political process since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein – and the only one who can end it with one word.

The PMC was created by former Iraqi prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki in July 2014 to provide a government umbrella for armed factions and volunteers who fought Daesh alongside the government. It comprises at least 150,000 fighters, mostly Shiites.

Armed Shiite factions, including Iranian-backed groups such as the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah-Iraq and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq – the most powerful in terms of numbers and equipment – are the backbone of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and have played a pivotal role in defeating Daesh. However, they have been accused of atrocities against Sunnis, and of being tools to pressure the government for illegal financial and political gain.

Under a law passed in 2016, the PMF's duties are determined by the commander-in-chief of the Iraqi armed forces, but the reality is that most of the factions are not subject to the orders of the Iraqi government and do not report to Iraqi military authorities.



Iraqi PM Adil Abdul Mahdi

Restructuring these factions and integrating their fighters with independent volunteers would dilute their power and prevent their commanders from taking advantage of the PMC's financial and human resources, PMC commanders close to Sistani told Arab News.

"We want the decisions of the PMC to be Iraqi, and not to use their forces to implement an Iranian agenda," one said. "The PMC must be institutionalized and subordinated to the regular military organization's controls. The PMF must not be stronger than the army under any circumstances."

The plan was prepared by a committee formed by Abdul Mahdi, and led by Lt.

Gen. Abdul Amir Yarallah, commander of joint military operations. The other members are Abu Montadher Al-Husseini, commander of PMFs operations, and Hamed Al-Shatri, deputy head of the National Security Service and administrative assistant to the head of the PMC. There are three stages: A decree outlining the proposals, approval of the organizational structure, and the settlement of salaries. The decree was issued on July 1, and salaries have been agreed upon.

"The first and third stages have been implemented because we have been working on this since last year, and work is underway to implement the second stage, which is the most difficult," one of Abdul Mahdi's security advisers told Arab News. "The signs so far are that all the factions are responding positively, but we don't feel comfortable. The real situation will not be clear until at least July 30."

Creating a new organizational structure begins with dismantling the brigades of each armed faction. "The core of the idea is to end the factions by dismantling their brigades and forming new ones, each of which will contain fighters from different factions along with independent fighters, taking into account the sectarian and ethnic balance," a leading commander involved in the process told Arab News.

"This is the most difficult step because the factions associated with Iran are trying to circumvent it by accepting all the proposals except those that require the dissolution of their brigades and the integration of their fighters with others.

"Everything depends on this step. It will mean reducing the risk of these factions by 80 percent, which is what Sistani wants."

Under the new salary settlement, which is already in operation, each fighter receives his salary directly from government banks using Q Cards, a form of electronic payment. Before, unit commanders received and distributed salaries, a system that reinforced their control of the fighters and was open to widespread corruption.

"We discovered thousands of spacemen (fake fighters) who were either expelled, left or lost during the fighting, but their names were not removed from the payroll so their commanders continued to receive their salaries," Abdul Mahdi's adviser said.

"We also found that most of the fighters were not getting their full salaries because the faction leaders were using the cash to fund their own fighters and activities outside the PMC."

The plan will also curb the powers of some PMC leaders and remove others, with the aim of limiting Iran's influence. At the top of that list is Jamal Jaafar, also known as Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandes, or "the Engineer," deputy head of the PMC but de facto commander of its forces. Mohandes, 65, was sentenced to death in his absence by a court in Kuwait for his role in deadly bombings there in 1983, he has been designated a terrorist by the US, and he is close to Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary

Guard Corps.

The organizational restructuring requires that Faleh Al-Fayadh, current head of the PMC, head of the National Security Service and known as "Iran's man in Iraq," retain his roles in return for appointing Al-Mohandes chief of staff and vice-chairman of the PMC – but stripped of any financial or administrative authority. In addition, Abu Zainab Al-Lami will be moved from his role as the manager of PMC security to be a deputy to the Interior Minister, and Abu Montadher Al-Husseini becomes a secretary-general for Abdul Mahdi.

These moves resulted in a heated dispute between Al-Mohandes and Fayyad, three prominent PMF commanders told Arab News. However, Ayatollah Al-Sistani's insistence on "trimming the nails of Al-Mohandes" and reducing Iran's influence on the PMC "forced everyone to accept the settlement."

"The Engineer represents the biggest challenges to Abdul Mahdi's plan because he works without laws or regulations, so he had to be dealt with calmly, transferring the battle from outside the body to inside, between the Engineer and Fayyad.

"Limiting Al-Mohandes's authority is great progress compared to before, when all the authority was exclusively in his hands, although he was not the head of the PMC."

Abdul Mahdi's adviser said: "All the indications are that Al-Mohandes is a burnt card, and that Iran has offered him up as a scapegoat to please Sistani.

"Iran is in an unenviable position, and it is not in its interest now to provoke Sistani or create any problem leading to a new front that may end its influence in Iraq."

Most of the influential Shiite armed factions have publicly announced their acceptance of the new structure, except Kata'ib Hezbollah; they want the inclusion of Kurdish peshmerga forces, armed groups linked to the Kurdish leaders, and the Sunni tribes linked exclusively to US troops in Iraq. The structure also requires the disclosure of the names of fighters and their leaders, and their real addresses, which does sit well with Kata'ib Hezbollah's usual secrecy. However, a PMC commander close to Soleimani said all factions would be subject to the structure, including Kata'ib, and there would be intensive meetings in the coming days to agree on the details.

"There is great pressure on the prime minister from Sistani and the Americans to rein in the factions and control them," a prominent PMF commander close to Soleimani told Arab News.

"The regional and international challenges are great, and it is not in the interests of Iran or Iraq that any Iranian-backed faction act against the will of the Iraqi government."



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Iraq's former prime minister Abadi hints at comeback Turkey begins second wave of operations against PKK in Iraq