

US Consulate employee charged with espionage

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-01 23:28

ANKARA: A Turkish court on Friday accepted an indictment charging a local employee of the US Consulate in Istanbul with espionage and attempting to overthrow the government, state media reported.

Metin Topuz, who liaised with the US Drug Enforcement Agency for the American mission, is accused of having links to US-based Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen.

Ankara alleges that Gulen ordered a failed coup in 2016, but he denies the claims.

The Istanbul court, which accepted the prosecutor's indictment issued last month, ordered Topuz to remain in jail, state news agency Anadolu said. He has been in custody since September 2017.

Topuz's trial will begin on March 26 and the first hearing will last three days. He faces life in jail if found guilty.

The consulate employee is suspected of having contacts with former police officers and a prosecutor on the run accused of links with the Gulen movement, Anadolu reported.

The agency added that the indictment claimed Topuz had "very intense contacts" with former police chiefs involved in a 2013 probe into corruption allegations that affected government officials at the time.

Ankara has dismissed that investigation as an attempted "judicial coup" against the government by the Gulen movement.

Topuz had been at the center of a visa row between Ankara and Washington in late 2017 after his arrest.

Turkey-US relations have been strained in recent years over multiple issues including the US refusing to extradite Gulen.

There was also a bitter row last summer over the detention of an American pastor, but tensions eased after his release in October.

The court's decision comes a day after a judge in the southeastern city of Mardin convicted a former local employee of the US consulate in Adana, southern Turkey.

Hamza Ulucay was found guilty of helping outlawed Kurdish militants, and sentenced to four years and six months in jail.

But the Mardin court ruled he be released because of the time he had already served in jail since March 2017.



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Turkish US consulate worker faces charges over Gulen links: DHATurkey orders arrest of nearly 200 people over suspected Gulen ties

[Venezuelan gold trade strains ties between Turkey, US](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-01 22:56

ANKARA: Washington will monitor trade between its NATO ally Turkey and Venezuela in case gold sanctions on Caracas are violated.

Reuters quoted a senior US official on Thursday, who called the issue a “hot potato” which was raised during a meeting of the US Treasury’s assistant secretary for terrorist financing, Marshall Billingslea, and Turkish officials in Ankara on Friday.

The head of the Turkey-Venezuela Parliamentary Friendship Group, Serkan Bayram, said that Turkish trade with Venezuela would continue despite US sanctions.

“Our businesspeople will continue to develop trade relations. Such a decision falls under our sovereignty, and it is in our national interest to do business with Venezuela,” Bayram told Arab News.

“Turkish trade with Caracas is in line with international norms and regulations. All our transactions with a democratically elected country are conducted openly, under the international community’s eyes,” he added.

According to official figures, Turkey imported precious metals worth in excess of \$900 million from Venezuela in 2018 – having imported none in 2017 – and Ankara now ranks among the largest importers of Venezuelan gold.

However, in November, Washington imposed sanctions on gold sales from the South American country, following accusations of government corruption and human rights violations.

In the face of international pressure, Caracas is now shifting toward Turkey, desperate for new trading partners to help prop up the country’s deteriorating economy.

In a visit to Caracas in December last year, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an ally of Venezuela’s incumbent leader, Nicolas Maduro, criticized the sanctions on Venezuela. “Political problems cannot be resolved by punishing an entire nation. We don’t approve of such measures that ignore global trade rules,” he said.

On a visit to Turkey two weeks ago, Venezuela’s minister of industries and national production, Tareck El Aissami, toured the Anatolian town of Corum, where Turkey refines most of its imported Venezuelan gold.

Cem Barlas Arslan, a legal expert from Kirikkale University, told Arab News: “From the perspective of international law, countries may implement sanctions through customs levies or similar foreign trade instruments, like the US has done to China, Russia, Iran and even Turkey.

“In this tense trade war, Ankara has two options: Either it minimizes all trade relations with Venezuela, or increases the trade in gold,” he added.

Close relations between Ankara and Caracas are likely to strain relations between Turkey and the US if the latter insists on enforcing sanctions on Venezuelan gold, as has previously happened between the two over US sanctions on Iran.

However, Karol Wasilewski, an analyst at the Warsaw-based Polish Institute of International Affairs, disagrees that there is a direct comparison.

“Although it may seem that, in Venezuela, Turkey is trying to repeat the ‘Iran’ approach, for now we lack evidence that it has substantially violated American sanctions,” he told Arab News.

“Diplomacy between Turkey and US has been so intense that I think both countries will sort the issue out, especially if the US decides to use the leverage it has over Turkey in terms of its economy and role in Syria.”



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Venezuela's Guaido courts Russia; powers divided on Maduro
Venezuela detains Colombian, Spanish, French journalists

[US Senate wants troops to stay in Syria, Afghanistan](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-01 22:52

WASHINGTON: The Republican-led US Senate advanced largely symbolic legislation on Thursday opposing plans for any abrupt withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan.

The Senate voted 68-23 in favor of a non-binding amendment, drafted by Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell saying it was the sense of the

Senate that militant groups in both countries continue to pose a “serious threat” to the US.

McConnell said he had introduced an amendment to a broader Middle East security bill urging a “continued commitment” until Al-Qaeda, Daesh and other groups are defeated.

“We’re not the world’s policemen, but we are the leader of the free world, and it’s incumbent upon the United States to lead, to maintain a global coalition against terror and to stand with our partners,” McConnell said in a speech in the Senate.

The procedural vote to cut off debate meant that the amendment would be added to a broader Middle East security bill likely to come up for a final Senate vote next week.

The amendment acknowledges progress against Daesh and Al-Qaeda in Syria and Afghanistan but warns that “a precipitous withdrawal” without effective efforts to secure gains could destabilize the region and create a vacuum that could be filled by Iran or Russia.

It calls upon the Trump administration to certify conditions have been met for the groups’ “enduring defeat” before any significant withdrawal from Syria or Afghanistan.

Thursday’s Senate action marked the second time in two months that the Republican-led Senate has supported a measure going against Trump’s foreign policy, although legislation to change his policies has yet to become law.

The potential impact of Thursday’s vote was uncertain, since the amendment McConnell offered was non-binding and there has been no indication of when, if ever, the broader Middle East security bill would come up for a House vote.

Trump has decided to withdraw 2,000 US troops from Syria on the grounds that Daesh militants no longer pose a threat, saying on Twitter on Wednesday, “We have beaten them” as he disputed Senate testimony by his director of national intelligence, Dan Coats, on Tuesday that the group still posed a threat.

Trump said earlier on Thursday he would bring American troops home if a peace deal were reached to end 17 years of war in Afghanistan. The US and the Taliban have sketched the outlines for an eventual peace accord, a US special envoy said on Monday, but there was no sign the insurgent group had accepted key US demands.



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Civilians fleeing in eastern Syria need transit site, aid in winter:
UNHCR Kabul control slips in Afghanistan amid US talks with Taliban

[Australia admits 'may have killed' civilians in Mosul raid](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Sat, 2019-02-02 00:49

SYDNEY: Australia on Friday acknowledged it may have killed as many as 18 civilians in an air strike on Mosul two years ago, during a massive and ultimately successful campaign to dislodge extremists.

Following an internal investigation, the Australian Defence Force said coalition raids against Daesh positions in the then-occupied northern Iraqi city on June 13, 2017 "may have caused civilian casualties."

"The coalition assesses that between six and 18 civilians may have been killed," during strikes on the Al Shafaar neighborhood.

Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld indicated there was no firm information about the number of deaths or whether they came as a result of the Australian strike, or from other coalition members.

The intense aerial bombardment to retake what had been Iraq's second-largest city has already been the subject of intense scrutiny, with the US-led coalition admitting over 1,100 civilian casualties.

A total of 30,008 strikes against Daesh were carried out between August 2014 and the end of August 2018, with the Mosul campaign being particularly intense.

Critics have alleged the coalition strategy leaned too much on overwhelming air power. While quicker and posing fewer risks for coalition forces, they allege it put civilians at greater risk.

Monitoring group Airwars says the number of civilian deaths acknowledged by the coalition is well below the true toll of the bombing campaign, estimating that at least 7,468 civilians were killed.

Daesh was known to hold civilians as human shields in a deliberate effort to evade detection, deter air strikes and shape Western public opinion against the war.

Hupfeld said the Australian strike was requested by Iraqi security forces and was in "full compliance with the law of armed conflict and applicable rules of engagement."

"The Australian Defence Force takes all feasible precautions to minimize the risk of civilian casualties."

Ahead of the strike, seven extremists were identified in a building and adjacent courtyard, armed with heavy weapons.

They were hit with a "500lb precision guided munition" which "achieved the effect desired."

Australia's defense forces said the civilian casualties were in a nearby building.



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After shedding Daesh, Mosul embraces makeoversAfter years of silence, music fills streets of Iraq's Mosul

[Sudan police fire tear gas on protest after prayers](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1549026467614490200

Fri, 2019-02-01 13:02

KHARTOUM: Sudanese police fired tear gas on Friday at worshippers leaving a mosque in the metropolis chanting "freedom, freedom" in an anti-government protest after the main weekly Muslim prayers, witnesses said.

Worshippers have held regular demonstrations after prayers at the mosque run by the opposition Umma Party in the capital's twin city Omdurman since its veteran leader, former premier Sadiq al-Mahdi, threw his support behind the

protest movement.

“Riot police swiftly moved in and fired tear gas at them,” a witness told AFP.

“They were also chanting freedom, peace, justice,” the rallying cry of the protests that erupted in December against the three-decade rule of President Omar al-Bashir, the witness said.

Demonstrations first broke out in the farming town of Atbara on December 19 after the government tripled the price of bread.

But they swiftly escalated into a broader protest movement that has been seen as the biggest threat to Bashir’s rule since he took power in an Islamist-backed coup that toppled Mahdi’s elected government in 1989.

Officials say 30 people have died in violence related to the protests. Human rights groups say children and medics have been among more than 40 people killed.



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