

Erdogan and Putin vow closer cooperation on Syria at Moscow talks

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MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan at a meeting in Moscow on Wednesday vowed to coordinate their actions more closely in Syria.

"Cooperation between Russia and Turkey is a touchstone for Syrian peace and stability," Erdogan said in translated comments at a joint press conference after their talks, which lasted around three hours.

"With our Russian friends we intend to strengthen our coordination even more."

"We agreed how we'll coordinate our work in the near future," Putin said, calling the talks which included the countries' defense ministers "effective."

At the start of their meeting in the Kremlin, Putin addressed Erdogan as "dear friend," saying that their countries "work on issues of regional security and actively cooperate on Syria."

Erdogan used the same term for Putin and said "our solidarity makes a weighty contribution to the security of the region."

The two leaders are on opposite sides of the Syria conflict: Russia provides critical support to the Syrian government, while Turkey has backed rebel groups fighting President Bashar Assad's forces.

Despite this, they have worked closely to find a political solution to the seven-year conflict.

Russia and Turkey have agreed to coordinate ground operations in Syria following US President Donald Trump's shock announcement last month about pulling 2,000 American troops out of Syria.

Putin said that if carried out, the withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria "will be a positive step, it will help stabilize the situation in this restive area."

Turkey has also welcomed Washington's planned withdrawal, but the future of US-backed Kurdish militia forces labelled terrorists by Ankara has upset ties between the NATO allies.

Erdogan had said on Monday he would discuss with Putin the creation of a Turkish-controlled "security zone" in northern Syria, suggested by Trump. The US-allied Kurds, who control much of the north, have rejected the idea, fearing a Turkish offensive against territory under their control.

Putin said Wednesday that Russia supports "establishing dialogue between Damascus officials and representatives of the Kurds."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week said that Damascus must take control of the north.

The northwestern province of Idlib earlier this month fell under the full control of a jihadist group dominated by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

The Russian foreign ministry said earlier Wednesday that the situation in the province remained of “serious concern.”

Putin said that the leaders discussed the situation in Idlib “in great detail today.”

“We have a shared conviction that we must continue jointly fighting terrorists wherever they are, including in the Idlib zone,” the Russian leader said.

Erdogan said that the countries will wage a “lengthy fight” in Syria.

Nearly eight years into Syria’s deadly conflict, the planned US pullout has led to another key step in Assad’s Russian-backed drive to reassert control. Kurdish forces who were left exposed by Trump’s pledge to withdraw have asked the Syrian regime for help to face a threatened Turkish offensive.

The Kremlin hailed the entry by Syrian forces into the key northern city of Manbij for the first time in six years after Kurds opened the gates.

Moscow plans to organize a three-way summit with Turkey and Iran early this year as part of the Astana peace process, launched by the three countries in 2017.

Putin said Wednesday the next summit would be held “in the near future” in Russia, saying the leaders still needed to agree the time and location with Iran.

The last meeting between Putin, Erdogan and Iran’s Hassan Rouhani took place in Iran in September last year with the fate of rebel-held Idlib province dominating the agenda.

Ties between Russia and Turkey plunged to their lowest level in years in November 2015 when Turkish forces shot down a Russian warplane over Syria. But after a reconciliation deal in 2016, relations have recovered at a remarkable speed with Putin and Erdogan cooperating closely over Syria, Turkey buying Russian-made air defense systems and Russia building Turkey’s first nuclear power plant.



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Russia says 'arbitrary' Israeli airstrikes on Syria must stop
Jordan officials hold talks in Syria on resuming flights

[Russia says 'arbitrary' Israeli airstrikes on Syria must stop](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-23 22:21

MOSCOW: Russia said on Wednesday that Israel should stop carrying out what Moscow called arbitrary airstrikes on Syria, days after the Israeli air force targeted what Israel said were Iranian forces there.

Israel has repeatedly attacked what it describes as Iranian targets in Syria and those of allied militia, including Lebanon's Hezbollah. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu describes the effort as an open-ended campaign to push back arch-foe Tehran.

The strikes have long caused friction between Israel and Russia, which apart from Iran is Bashar Assad's other major foreign backer.

Israeli officials have spoken in the past of an agreement with Moscow under which they have made clear their strikes on Syria would not threaten Assad, while Russia has promised to help limit Iranian influence near the Israeli frontier. A hotline set up since 2015 is aimed at ensuring Russian forces in Syria are not surprised by Israeli attacks.

"The practice of arbitrary strikes on the territory of a sovereign state, in this case, we are talking about Syria, should be ruled out," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, in answer to a question from Russian news agency TASS about recent Israeli airstrikes on Syria.

She said such strikes added to tensions in the region, which she said was not in the long-term interests of any country there, including Israel.

"We should never allow Syria, which has suffered years of armed conflict, to be turned into an arena where geopolitical scores are settled," TASS cited her as saying.

Her comments follow Israeli strikes in Syria on Monday. Israel did not immediately respond.

Earlier on Wednesday, Netanyahu signaled that the Syria sorties would continue.

"The IDF (Israel Defense Force) is the only military that is fighting the

Iranian army in Syria,” he said during a visit to an Israeli army base. “I am certain in our ability to defeat the enemy.”



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Putin and Erdogan to hold Syria talks Israel bombs Iranian targets in Syria

[Braving dangerous waters, Iranians seek a better life in Britain](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-23 21:41

LIVERPOOL: The traffickers told Fardin Gholami that a fishing boat would take him from France to England at midnight, but when he and five other Iranian asylum seekers got to the beach, all they found was an inflatable dinghy with nobody to sail it.

Gholami had paid €16,000 to human traffickers to take him from Kamyaran, in western Iran, to Britain. But on the seashore near Calais he realized he and

his compatriots would now have to fend for themselves.

“They showed us a red light on the horizon and said we should sail toward that,” said Gholami, 31, one of hundreds of Iranians who have risked their lives to cross the English Channel.

The Channel is one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes, and the migrants’ inflatable boats are not equipped to cross it, especially in treacherous winter weather.

“Sometimes there were big ships. It was scary. We knew if we crashed into them, that would be the end of us,” he said.

Mohammad Salehi Bakhtiari, 47, crossed the Channel in October. “The waves were coming from all directions. It was a nightmare. We saw death many times in the four hours it took to cross. Those four hours felt like four months,” he told Reuters.

More than 500 migrants – mostly Iranians, some of them children – attempted to travel to Britain in rubber dinghies in 2018, four out of five of them in the last three months of the year. Some were turned back to France.

British Home Secretary Sajid Javid cut short a family holiday to address the issue. Britain has doubled the number of patrol boats in the Channel to four, along with a naval ship.

One month after he was arrested near the port of Dover, Gholami lives in a hostel in Liverpool, temporary accommodation provided by the government while his asylum claim is being processed.

His roommate, Babak Hajjipour, 40, also crossed the Channel in December. “We thought that if we did not succeed we would die and it would be over once and for all,” he said.

British media described the Iranian exodus as a final effort to reach Britain before it leaves the EU. But all the asylum seekers that Reuters spoke to said Brexit was not a factor for them. One had not even heard of it.

Gholami, a teacher, left Iran after his environmental activist friends were arrested and he feared he would be too.

Bakhtiari, an electricity project manager, spent two years in prison for distributing information about labor rights in factories. He fled the country while on temporary release.

Hajjipour, a plumber and electrician, left after being beaten by police on the street for wearing shorts.

“I think sanctions, the economic situation on Iran, and mixing religion with politics are the main reasons why people are leaving the country,” he said.

He hoped eventually to bring his family to Britain, including his 7-year-old daughter. “She will not have a bright future in Iran,” Hajjipour said.

Dead end

Other Iranian asylum seekers in Europe and Turkey told Reuters they decided to leave Iran after giving up hope in the face of growing economic and political difficulties.

Last summer, US President Donald Trump pulled out of an international agreement to restrict Tehran's nuclear program, imposing sanctions that caused prices to soar in Iran.

In 2018, more than 21,000 Iranians left the country to seek asylum in Europe, Turkey, the US, Canada and Australia, UN figures show.

Iran's Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Baqeri, said: "Foreign enemies are encouraging young people to leave Iran and turn their backs on the values of the Islamic revolution, persuading people that resisting superpowers will lead to war."

In the third quarter of 2018, the number of Iranian asylum seekers in Britain increased more than 30 percent from the previous year. The Home Office said most asylum applicants last year came from Iran.

"Here and maybe in other countries, there are more Iranian refugees than Syrians," Gholami said.

"The situation in Iran is worse than a country at war. Especially recently, because of the country's nuclear ambitions, the economic situation has deteriorated and I think there will be a new wave of Iranian economic refugees," he said.

A 37-year-old Iranian, who asked not to be named because he feared for the safety of his family in Iran, said he sold his house to come to Britain.

"I never dreamed of coming to Europe. I had a decent life in Iran, a car, a small factory with workers."

He said he felt humiliated queuing for food in Liverpool, where he receives 35 pounds a week from the British government. But a bus ride in the city costs 2.50 pounds and he has to pay more than 30 pounds for an Internet connection on his phone to talk to his family back home.

There, a worker earns only enough in a day to buy half-a-kilo of meat. "Because of sanctions, people are at a dead end," he said.

Affluent but without hope

Economic hardship might have triggered an exodus from Iran, but Roya Kashefi of the Association of Iranian Researchers believes Iranian refugees should be considered political, not economic migrants.

"Iranian asylum seekers are mostly middle class and educated. Some are affluent enough to pay \$16,000 to human traffickers," said Kashefi who works with the Home Office on Iranian asylum seekers.

In Calais, Maya Konforti, secretary of the Association l'Auberge des Migrants, believes Iranian asylum seekers resort to extreme measures like sewing their lips together, hunger strikes, or crossing the Channel in small boats, because of their middle class background.

"They had a decent life, from a financial point of view, in Iran, while living conditions in Calais are horrendous. They were used to living in a house, and here they have to live in a muddy tent in the cold. So they cannot stand it," Konforti told Reuters.

"They tell us staying in Calais is like dying one day at a time. They are ready to try anything. They say OK, boats. We don't care. We take the risk, we might die, but at least we will die quickly."

The number of Iranians in and around Calais began growing in late 2017 after Serbia scrapped visa requirements for Iranian citizens, opening up an easier route to the EU.

Serbia canceled the initiative 14 months later after 1,100 Iranian sought asylum there. Others moved on.

One Tehran resident told Reuters that many young people and families wanted to leave for a better life.

His first attempt in June to reach Europe via Russia failed after almost a month on the road.

"The human traffickers asked us for more money. We didn't have any, so they took our mobile phones and left us in the middle of the road. We really struggled to return to Iran."

He is saving money for his next journey to Europe through Turkey.



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6 Iranians found on English beach as Channel crossings mount
Facing new sanctions, Iranians vent anger at rich and powerful

[Yemen prisoner swap terms expected in coming days, says govt delegate](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-23 21:34

ADEN: Yemen's warring parties are expected to agree on the terms of a prisoner exchange in around 10 days, a representative of the internationally recognized Yemeni government said on Wednesday.

Talks between the two sides took place in Jordan last week. Both parties need to agree on lists of prisoners to be swapped.

"We expect that in 10 days time the final signing will have happened," the head of the government delegation to the prisoner-exchange talks, Hadi Haig, told Reuters by telephone.

The UN is pushing for the exchange and a peace deal in Yemen's main port, Hodeidah. That could open the way for more talks between the Iran-backed Houthi militants and the Yemeni government on ending the country's civil war.

The swap was one of the least contentious confidence-building measures at December's UN-sponsored peace talks in Sweden, held amid Western pressure to end the conflict. The fighting has lasted nearly four years, killed tens of thousands of people.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said on Wednesday that it hopes to see "progress in the coming days" and urged the warring parties not to let the opportunity slip away.

"This is a crucial moment for the people of Yemen," Red Cross regional director Fabrizio Carboni said in a statement.

The ICRC official said it was preparing for the swap by increasing staff numbers and arranging medical support.

The ICRC was also preparing two planes to carry detainees between Sanaa and Sayoun, a town under the control of the Yemeni government, he said.

The conflict pits the Iran-backed Houthis against Yemeni forces backed by an Arab coalition, which are trying to restore the government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

The conflict began after pro-democracy unrest forced the former president, the late Ali Abdullah Saleh, to step down in 2012.

Hadi was elected to a two-year term to head a transitional government. Later Hadi was forced into exile by the Houthis, which prompted the Arab coalition to intervene in Yemen in 2015.



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Yemeni troops stop Houthi advances, inflict further casualties
Al-Qaeda suspects among 1,200 who escaped from Yemen prison

[Thousands at funeral of Palestinian killed in Australia](#)

Wed, 2019-01-23 21:56

BAQA AL-GHARBIYA, ISRAEL: Thousands of mourners attended the funeral on Wednesday of Aya Maasarwe, an Arab Israeli student killed in Australia, in her hometown of Baqa Al-Gharbiya in northern Israel.

The 21-year-old was raped and murdered in Australia's second-largest city Melbourne shortly after midnight on Jan. 16 when she was on her way home from a comedy show.

Her body was found by passers-by in bushes near a tram stop.

Police in Australia, who have described the attack as “horrific,” have arrested and charged a suspect, 20-year-old Codey Herrmann, with her rape and murder.

The murder of Maasarwe, who had been studying in Australia for a year, shocked the country and sparked a huge outpouring of grief that saw thousands attend vigils in her memory.

“I appreciate the support of all these people, in the whole world and also in my town,” said her father, Saeed Maasarwe, with Australia’s ambassador to Israel, Chris Cannan, by his side.

Thousands of people gathered in silence at Baqa Al-Gharbiya, a town with a Muslim majority, as mourners carried the coffin containing Maasarwe’s body to her family home.

The only sound that could be heard was of Muslim prayers from loudspeakers.

Youths marching in a procession held up black banners that read “It’s time to say: Stop killing women” and “Women have the right to live in peace” in both Arabic and English.

A crowd of mourners then followed Maasarwe’s coffin as it was taken to the Al-Sarat Mosque and cemetery where she was laid to rest.

Hours earlier, the town’s mayor, Khaled Abu Mukh, and Israeli Arab MP Ahmad Tibi accompanied Maasarwe’s father as her coffin arrived at the airport.

In a video posted on social media, Tibi said Maasarwe was now the daughter of all Arab Israelis.

Arab Israelis are descendants of Palestinians who remained on their land following the creation of Israel in 1948.

They account for some 17.5 percent of Israel’s population and largely support the Palestinian cause.



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Israeli student murdered in Australia while on phone with sister
Australian police arrest man over Israeli student's death