

Austria rejects EU military cooperation with Turkey

Author:

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ANKARA: Austria has rejected a formal request by Turkey to join a powerful EU security and defense cooperation program.

Ankara's May bid to be included in the bloc's Permanent Structured Cooperation Framework (PESCO) was given the cold shoulder by Vienna over its concerns about Turkish backsliding on democratic values and ties with Brussels.

PESCO covers 46 joint defense projects in partnership with 24 EU member states and is one of the union's key defense and security policies.

Since autumn last year, membership has been opened up to non-EU countries that fulfilled a set of political and legal criteria such as democratization, respect of common security and defense policies, and maintaining good relations with their EU neighbors.

However, the ongoing standoff between Ankara and Athens about the situation of Greek islands, and rising tensions over Turkey's recently announced settlement project on the divided island of Cyprus, are considered a barrier to good neighborliness.

Marc Pierini, a former EU ambassador to Turkey and now analyst at Carnegie Europe, told Arab News: "Austria's position may be expressed in stark terms, but it probably reflects the overall EU stand on the matter of Turkey's participation in PESCO.

"The overall reason is that Turkey's current rule-of-law architecture has not much to do with Europe's anymore and nobody sees much of a prospect for improvement," he said.

On Tuesday, Turkey's defense minister said that his country expected Greece to opt for peaceful political solutions and called for the disarmament of Greek islands that had non-military status.

Greece's recent purchase of Rafale fighter jets from France was criticized by Turkey as an attempt to begin an "arms race."

But the presence of Russian S-400 missile systems on Turkish soil has been viewed as a contradictory stance with the common security and defense interests of the EU.

The admission of non-EU countries to PESCO aims at increasing cooperation between NATO partners, improving military mobility within and beyond the EU, and standardizing cross-border military procedures such as the movement of military equipment across the union in times of crisis.

Although Turkey's application to PESCO is not seen as timely, its participation in the project would likely boost its air, land, sea, and cyber capabilities in a military sense, and would provide the country with a new avenue to improve cooperation with the EU and normalize its relations with bloc members.

Pierini pointed out that Turkey's interest in being associated with PESCO would signal a lasting anchorage to the West. But, he added, the latest visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Northern Cyprus, and the massive geopolitical gain given to Russia through the purchase of S-400 weapon systems, all pointed to a different direction.

"So, we are clearly in a dead-end alley at the moment," he said.

Dr. Selmin Seda Coskun, a foreign policy analyst, told Arab News that Turkey had taken important foreign policy steps, especially during June, to meet the EU's requirements for good neighborly relations.

So far, Turkey and Greece have held three consultative rounds of talks and a number of deconfliction meetings under NATO.

"However, it is obvious that it cannot achieve the same progress at the domestic sphere," Coskun said.

She noted that Ankara was attempting to boost military cooperation with the Western community to avoid backing itself into a corner over the S-400 impasse.

"The sale of Turkish-made unmanned aerial vehicles to Ukraine and Poland in order to consolidate its presence in the alliance, Turkey's participation into NATO's Black Sea ships exercise, as well as assuming a more prominent role in Afghanistan, especially as US troops gear up to exit in September, prove that Turkey is capable of doing this reconciliatory move in its foreign policy," she added.

However, Coskun pointed out that to take part in PESCO, Turkey needed to prove a willingness to tackle its poor human rights record and convince the EU about impending domestic democratic progress.

"Either PESCO's members would consider Turkey's latest foreign policy moves and not expect too much from Ankara, or Turkey would understand that it would be more advantageous to follow EU values in its domestic policy preferences," she said.



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[Yemen braces for third COVID-19 wave amid vaccine shortage](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-07-28 21:57

ALEXANDRIA: Yemen's internationally recognized government has put health facilities and workers on high alert and demanded that people follow COVID-19 restrictions as the country braces for a third wave of the virus.

"Our trained health workers are on the ground, ready to deal with the third wave as they did with previous waves," Ishraq Al-Subaee, a spokesman for the Aden-based National Coronavirus Committee, told Arab News on Wednesday, adding that the government is working on boosting the supply of oxygen and applying more health measures to mitigate the impact of the new wave.

Prompted by a sudden surge in the number of coronavirus cases in government-controlled areas, Yemen's Health Minister Qasem Buhaibeh said on Twitter on Tuesday that the Yemeni government has ordered health workers to "get ready for a new wave" and to "prepare health facilities and quarantines for a possible influx of cases," urging Yemenis to abide by health precautions.

"We call on citizens to be careful and take the necessary precautionary health measures, as we have field indicators of an increase in coronavirus cases," Buhaibeh said.

The government's coronavirus committee on Tuesday recorded 10 new infections in five Yemeni provinces and zero deaths, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 7,022. There have been 1,374 deaths and 4,168 recoveries. On Monday, the committee announced the recording no new cases, one death and two recoveries.

Ishraq said that Yemen would receive in August thousands of AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccines as part of the international COVAX scheme, and that priority would be given to Yemenis who would receive their first shot.

Health experts argue that it is hard to predict the trajectory of the coronavirus pandemic in the country, given the fact that two-thirds of the Yemeni population live in areas under the Houthis control, where officials conceal information about the pandemic and obstruct the distribution of vaccines.

"The epidemiological situation in Yemen is ambiguous," Abdulla bin Ghouth, a professor of community medicine and epidemiology at Hadramout University's College of Medicine, and an adviser to the health minister, told Arab News on Wednesday, adding that the country has a "weak surveillance and diagnosis process" and a "crumbling health system."

Despite not ruling out the possibility of a third wave, Bin Ghouth said that Yemen is experiencing a post-second wave period due to the stable level of new cases and deaths. "Through my weekly follow-up to the epidemiological curve, there is a constant continuation of a low level of cases, not a sharp decrease or a double rise," he said.

In April, Yemen kicked off vaccination campaigns in government-controlled areas, three weeks after receiving the first shipment of COVID-19 shots.

At the beginning of the campaign, the turnout was very poor, until Saudi Arabia and other countries said that they would only allow fully vaccinated people to enter into their countries.

Thousands of Yemenis showed up at vaccination centers, consuming the country's stock of the vaccines within a short period.

Yemeni health officials said that almost 320,000 Yemenis were vaccinated during the first and second rounds of the jab rollout and about 72,000 people have already registered on the ministry's news site to receive vaccines.

At the same time, thousands of Yemeni travelers who were left stuck at home due to a shortage of vaccines have demanded that the government swiftly administer new doses, complaining that many Yemenis have lost jobs since they could not get a vaccine on time.

Mohammed Abdul Kareem, a Yemeni expatriate in a Gulf country, said that he waited three months to receive a second shot of a COVID-19 vaccine and that his visa would expire if he did not get it next month.

“As my visa expires soon, please tell us will the vaccines arrive at the beginning of August or in the middle,” Abdul Kareem said, commenting on the health minister’s post on Twitter.

Double-jabbed Yemenis also complained that they have not yet received electronic certificates proving their vaccination from the ministry. The health minister justified the delays in issuing the certificates, citing “huge pressure” from thousands of vaccinated people, and added that the ministry is “working on addressing the issue.”



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Yemeni government demands ‘effective’ pressure on Houthis to accept peace efforts
Houthi artillery shells kill 3 civilians in Yemen’s Taiz

Greece, Cyprus win Jordan backing against Erdogan 'ghost town' plan

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ATHENS: Greece, Cyprus and regional ally Jordan on Wednesday called for a "comprehensive and viable settlement of the Cyprus problem" after Turkey said it would reopen a former resort in the disputed north of the island. Leaders of the three countries, speaking at a summit in Athens, were responding to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's announcement last week of plans to reopen Varosha.

The former resort has been a fenced-off ghost town since a 1974 invasion by Turkey resulted in a UN-monitored standoff that divided the Mediterranean island.

According to a joint statement issued after the summit, the three leaders said they were committed to a "comprehensive and viable settlement of the Cyprus problem in line with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and international law."

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called the recent developments on Cyprus "deplorable."

In opening remarks, he said that the summit between the three leaders "reflects the commitment of our countries to promote peace stability and prosperity in our wider region."

Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades said he briefed the other leaders "on the Cyprus problem especially after the recent announcements that have been condemned by the UN Security Council, as well as by the EU."

The EU, of which Cyprus is a member state, condemned "Turkey's unilateral steps and the unacceptable announcements" and demanded Ankara reverse a decision that threatens the delicate status quo in the region.

Erdogan vowed that "life will restart in Varosha" during a controversial visit to mark 47 years since the invasion that split Cyprus.

Greece and Cyprus have been seeking to expand cooperation with other countries in the region with an eye on Turkey's more nationalist and expansionary policies under Erdogan.

"We are nations that share the Eastern Mediterranean (region) and I think we will continue to play a vital role and look for wider cooperation," King Abdullah II of Jordan said during Wednesday's trilateral meeting.



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[Lebanon prepares to mourn victims of Aug. 4 blast on first anniversary](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-07-28 21:48

BEIRUT: Lebanon has declared Aug. 4 a national day of mourning ahead of the first anniversary of the deadly Beirut blast.

As part of the mourning, all public administrations and government institutions will be closed and flags will fly at half-mast.

Regular scheduling of radio and television will also be changed to commemorate the tragedy, which was caused by a massive explosion of ammonium nitrate stored in the Port of Beirut.

The blast killed 215 people, injured more than 6,500 and destroyed large swathes of the city.

An investigation into the blast has failed to deliver an indictment so far, with judge Tarek Bitar waiting on a request to lift immunity from three former lawmakers and ministers as a first step toward formally charging them.

A strike by lawyers in Lebanon has also served as an excuse for the defendants to avoid appearing with their attorneys before Bitar.

The Cassation Public Prosecution on Wednesday told Bitar to "take the necessary measures to determine the suspicions and evidence against Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, director general of the General Security, before prosecuting him."

The Lebanese Cabinet announced on Wednesday that it cannot permit the prosecution of Maj. Gen. Tony Saliba, director general of State Security, and that instead, the Supreme Defense Council must grant permission.

If given permission, Bitar will be entitled to question both officials and prosecute them along with caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab and many others, including former army commander Gen. Jean Kahwaji.

Charges likely to result from court cases range from omission and negligence offenses to constructive malice of murder, because several defendants were allegedly aware of the large quantities of ammonium nitrate in the port, but did not act to prevent an incident.

Bitar is preparing to simulate the explosion and had earlier set a date for the simulation at the end of July. But according to Arab News' sources, "the simulation process is related to the weather conditions and other logistics related to the Customs and General Security."

The Aug. 4 blast left thousands of people in Beirut homeless and damaged areas surrounding the city, with streets left covered with glass and blood. Debris remained across the city for several days.

A year after the blast, many of the wounded are still undergoing surgery.

Salwa Baalbaki, a journalist at An-Nahar newspaper, told Arab News: "My right hand has been operated upon twice so far, as the tendons were ruptured by the broken glass that fell in my office, across the port."

She is still receiving physical therapy and cannot hold a pen properly.

Baalbaki said that she moved to a village in the south of the country and is working remotely as she cannot return to the An-Nahar building, which is still undergoing restoration and renovation work.

She added: "I went to Beirut two days ago and headed to the An-Nahar building, but I started shivering and had a panic attack. I cried a lot. I am devastated and the current crises have only made it worse for me. I can't sleep at night.

"Specialists at the American University of Beirut told me all those who were wounded by the blast are feeling the same way and have not been able to return to their normal lives yet.

"Every time I watch the news about the Beirut blast or listen to the families of the victims speaking, I get emotional and start crying. The civil war failed to do what the blast did to me. I have been losing my focus and forgetting a lot. Everything reminds me of the explosion. I think I am going to have to see a therapist."

Baalbaki said that she paid for her own physical therapy, as "nobody cares for us."

She noted her resentment toward Lebanon's political class "as they committed their crime and left us to pay the price for it.

"I wish I could leave the country for good and never have to hear anything about it again, but my father is old and cannot travel and that is what is keeping me here, but this country does not mean anything to me anymore," she said.

Heritage buildings in residential areas surrounding the port have remained destroyed and deserted, while residents have returned to other buildings that were restored by local private associations through foreign support.

Brazilian football star Ronaldinho arrived on Tuesday in Beirut to support and stand in solidarity with the Lebanese people on the first anniversary of the blast.

He visited the Beirut Fire Brigade headquarters in Karantina and the Civil Defense center at the port, which lost 10 personnel who were trying to extinguish a fire in the silo at the source of the explosion.

Ronaldinho lay a wreath for the victims and met officials from associations that helped in the reconstruction and relief of the affected.



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Angry relatives of Beirut blast victims attempt to storm minister's residence
Massive fire 'almost under control' in north Lebanon

[Massive fire 'almost under control' in north Lebanon](#)

Wed, 2021-07-28 20:03

BEIRUT: A massive fire broke out in the Qobayat area north of Lebanon on Wednesday and spread so fast that many families were stuck in their properties.

A spokesperson for the Lebanese Civil Defence (LCD) told Arab News the blaze was a result of high temperatures, humidity, and winds but was "almost under control" after more than 16 firefighting brigades responded to the fire.

"Fire brigades from Tripoli and Beirut have been extinguishing the enormous flames that we face every summer season," the LCD spokesperson said. "The head of LCD operations is supervising the fire-extinguishing process."

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) told Arab News it also dispatched teams to the Qobayat area when the fire broke out.

"We evicted families including women, children, and the elderly as our teams remain on the ground," the LRC spokesperson said.

According to the LRC Twitter account, 17 people were evicted, 25 were treated at the site and eight were hospitalized as a result of the fire.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun ordered the Lebanese Army and LCD to exert all efforts to extinguish the fire and prevent it from reaching homes and properties. He also gave orders to evict any families that could be in the path of the fire.

Aoun asked local authorities to communicate with Cypriot authorities for assistance if the fire escalated.

The National News Agency (NNA) said the Lebanese Army rescued a number of citizens from their cars after they were surrounded by fires that broke out near the Qobayat-Rowaymah Highway.

One of Qobayat mayors, Youssef Nader, told Al-Jadeed TV that 60 percent of the fire that surrounded residential areas had been brought under control, but blazes in the nearby fields "remain out of control."

One wounded person was transferred to the Al-Salam Hospital Emergency Department in Qobayat.

Lebanese Army helicopters, civil defense teams, and volunteers from Qobayat and other areas in Akkar continued to battle the blaze on Wednesday, which expanded towards new areas in Mount Akroum, the NNA reported.



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Lebanon's MTV slammed over deepfake video of Beirut port blast victims Aoun says Lebanon is keen to maintain best relations with Arab countries