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## Turkish Defense Firms Deepen Cooperation with Saudi Arabia

Turkish Defense firms Baykar, Aselsan and Roketsan have signed new agreements with Saudi Arabia in an attempt to deepen the cooperation between Ankara and Riyad in the defense realm. The new agreements that paved the way for new defense exports came after Turkey's leading drone producer, Baykar, inked the most significant defense export contract with Saudi Arabia during President Erdoğan's Gulf tour in July 2023.

Aselsan and Roketsan also joined Baykar's recent bid and signed memorandums of understanding with the Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) for Mechanical Systems. The Turkish defense firms, specifically Baykar, are expected to cooperate with their Saudi counterparts in defense localization initiatives and technology transfer. The signing ceremony was held in Riyadh under the auspices of the Saudi Defense Ministry.

## The Taliban Delegation's Visit to Ankara

A Taliban delegation led by the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of Afghanistan, Abdul Ghani Baradar, visited Ankara and met with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan. The two sides focused on regional developments and discussed ways to deepen trade engagement and economic cooperation. Minister Hakan Fidan has said that the investments of Turkish investors in Afghanistan would be encouraged, and the meetings between the two countries in this respect would continue.

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# Bashar al-Assad Rejects to Meet with President Erdoğan

In an interview with Sky News Arabia on Wednesday, the Syrian regime leader Bashar al-Assad rejected to meet with President Erdoğan under the latter's terms. According to Assad, while Syria's expectation from a meeting with Erdoğan is the withdrawal of the Turkish troops from Syrian soil, Erdoğan's primary goal is to legitimize Turkish 'occupation' in Northern Syria. Additionally, he accused Turkey of being the primary backer of 'terrorism.' Furthermore, the regime leader put forth that the Syrian refugees cannot return to their countries while electricity, school, and medicine are unavailable, effectively showing his unwillingness vis-à-vis refugees returning to Syria.

Al-Assad's statement and consistent intransigence make it clear that Turkey cannot solve its Syria-related problem through a full-fledged normalization process with the regime. Due to Syrian refugees in Turkey, the border security, and the possibility of a joint fight against the YPG/ PYD, Turkey has sought to reconcile with the regime. The Turkish efforts explicitly heightened at the end of 2022, after the Turkish officials met with their Syrian counterparts, including the then Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, in Moscow under Russian auspices. In May 2023, the then-Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also met with the regime's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad in Moscow.

That being said, the Syrian regime, despite Russian pressure, constantly blocked the normalization efforts with Turkey by stipulating preconditions such as the withdrawal of the Turkish troops from Northern Syria and Ankara ceasing its support for the Syrian opposition. Ankara deemed the preconditions unacceptable. As a result, the meetings of both sides have not borne fruit thus far.

#### Syria Grants Permission to the UN for Humanitarian Aid Delivery

Last Tuesday, the UN announced that it had reached an understanding with the Syrian regime, and humanitarian aid deliveries from Turkey to Northwestern Syria would resume through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for the next six months. The details on the reopening were not mentioned by the UN. The mentioned border crossing stopped operating in mid-July as Russia vetoed the extension of the UN's mandate for aid delivery into Syria at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The Syrian regime had stipulated conditions for the resumption of aid through the Bab-al-Hawa border crossing. Nonetheless, the UN found them unacceptable, leading to a weeks-long pause in humanitarian aid delivery. This time, the regime seemed to loosen its preconditions. The border crossing has been a lifeline for millions of displaced people in Idlib.

In addition to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, humanitarian aid to Northern Syria will also be delivered through Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai crossings until November 13, 2023. The UN has used these two border crossings after the tragic earthquake that hit Syria and Turkey in February 2023. However, Syria's permission for the two crossings was due to expire on August 13.

The delivery of humanitarian aid has been a contentious issue between the Syrian regime, Russia and the UN. Russia consistently uses its veto right in the UNSC when the extension of the UN's mandate for humanitarian aid to Syria is voiced. Through its vetoes, Russia tries to increase the legitimacy of the regime. The Syrian regime wants to establish complete control over humanitarian aid entering Syria. However, Damascus is known for its misuse and misallocation of humanitarian aid, prompting fear among the needy people of Northwestern Syria.

#### Israeli Attack in Damascus

Last Sunday, Israeli warplanes once again conducted airstrikes in Damascus, leading to the death of 4 Syrian regime soldiers, according to the Syrian state media. Moreover, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that two non-Syrian militias were also killed in the Israeli attack.

Israeli air attacks constantly take place in Syria. Due to the Russian-Iranian rivalry, many experts argue that Moscow tacitly let Israel bomb Iran-backed militias. Although Russia has deployed air defense systems in Syria, it does not operate them to counter the Israeli attacks. Russia and Israel are known to have good bilateral ties, and Moscow does not seem to be willing to prevent Israel from conducting airstrikes against Iran-backed militias even though both Iran and Russia have been two staunch supporters of the Syrian regime over the course of the Syrian Crisis. On the other hand, the Syrian regime and its supporters try to utilize Israeli attacks to increase its legitimacy in the eyes of the Arab peoples and governments by popularizing the resistance rhetoric against the 'Zionist entity.'

#### ISIS Kills 10 Regime Soldiers in Syria

At least ten Syrian regime soldiers were killed in an ISIS attack in Raqqa, Syria. According to different monitoring platforms, many other soldiers were wounded, increasing the likelihood of a bigger toll in the upcoming days. Since its territorial defeat in Syria in March 2019, the terror group ISIS consistently conducts attacks against the Syrian regime forces, as well as Russian troops and the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the desert areas of the country, leading to casualties for the mentioned parties. Ever since the defeat, the group embraced guerilla warfare tactics and carried out hit-and-run attacks.

# SAUDI ARABIA

#### Saudi Arabia Hosts Talks on Ukraine

Last Saturday, Saudi Arabia hosted a meeting in which more than 40 countries participated in Jeddah to discuss principles that can help end the Ukraine crisis. Russia was not among the participant countries, as it previously rejected the Ukrainian formula for ending the war. In contrast, Ukrainian President Zelensky participated in the meeting in Saudi Arabia. Although this meeting was not expected to produce dramatic results for the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, it served Riyad's ambitious goals. For some time, Saudi Arabia has been hedging its bets in foreign policy and diversifying its foreign policy options. Riyad distances itself from the USA and amplifies its engagement with Russia and China through different ventures. Under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's (MbS) leadership, Saudi Arabia aspires to increase its soft power in line with the assertive Vision 2030. MbS is eagerly trying to polish Saudi Arabia's image at the international level.

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# → IRAN

## US Sailors and Marines Deploy to Red Sea Amid Iran Tensions

The U.S. Fifth Fleet announced on Monday the arrival of over three thousand American sailors to the Middle East as part of a plan to enhance military presence in the region and "deter Iran from seizing ships and oil tankers." Fleet spokesperson, Tim Hawkins, stated that the deployment underscores "our strong and steadfast commitment to regional maritime security." The U.S. military asserts that Iran has detained or attempted to seize approximately 20 ships in the region over the past two years. Washington has announced that its forces thwarted two Iranian attempts to seize oil tankers in international waters off the coast of Oman on the 5th of July, while Tehran seized a commercial vessel the following day. Iran seized two tankers within a week in its territorial waters in April and early May and was accused of launching a drone attack on an Israeli-owned tanker in November 2022.

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## Netanyahu Calls for a Military Threat that Would Deter Iran

During his meeting with Democratic lawmakers close to the Israeli lobby in Congress, Netanyahu said, "The most important thing is to create a real military threat to Iran, and the second thing is to exploit it if everything else fails," adding: "We will do everything we can, with or without an agreement, to protect ourselves."

This meeting included a group of 24 members of Congress, led by Hakim Jeffries, the leader of the Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives, and Michael T. McCaul, the head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Starting from September of last year, the collective efforts of global powers (including the United States, Russia, Britain, Germany, China, and France) to re-establish the 2015 nuclear agreement with Tehran have encountered difficulties due to growing Western apprehensions regarding Iran's swift advancements in nuclear weapons production.

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## High Council of State Elects New Leader

Amid a notoriously stagnant UN-sponsored political process, efforts to reshape power dynamics in Libya continue. Last Sunday, the High Council of State (HCS) elected Mohammed Takkala as its new Head, succeeding Khalid Al-Mishri. The HCS is an advisory board established as a part of the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement, ratified following UN-brokered peace discussions. Disagreements over electoral laws have continuously postponed the general election from taking place, with it initially being planned for December 2021. We've seen some movement in previous weeks, with the House of Representatives and HOS amending and approving a draft roadmap for interim government elections. Last week, HCS members conducted internal elections for four presidential candidates: Al-Mishri, Takkala, Nayima Al-Hami, and Naji Mukhtar. Al-Mishri secured the most votes in the first round; however, since no candidate received 66 votes or more, a second round was held. In this round, Takkala emerged victorious with 67 votes, with Al-Mishri losing by a slight margin at 62 votes. Masoud Abid and Omar Al-Obeidi were voted as Takkala's deputies. The Head position is subject to annual elections according to the HCS bylaws. Some analysts believe this defeat of Al-Mishri may encourage Haftar to follow suit in the country's eastern region where he is based, namely by pushing for elections for a new speaker of the HoR to replace Aguila Saleh. Some believe a campaign will gain momentum in the coming days. If this is the case, this may pose a blow to any recent hopes of an election.

#### ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH

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