

Iran to bolster Syria air defences, counter US 'pressure'

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● Iran has always denied sending forces to fight in Syria

● State TV's website published a video of Bagheri and Syria's Defence Minister Ali Ayoub signing the latest agreement in Damascus

AFP | Tehran



Syrian air defences responding to what state media said were Israeli missiles targeting Damascus early last year, one of hundreds of reported such strikes

Iran has said it will strengthen Syria's air defences as part of a bilateral military deal aiming to "fight terrorism" and counter American pressure.

Israel, Iran's arch-enemy, has launched hundreds of strikes in Syria since the start of a civil war there in 2011, including against Iranian forces.

Iran, one of President Bashar al-Assad's main allies in the conflict, has always denied sending forces to fight in Syria, saying it only has military advisors there.

Under the latest deal, "we will strengthen Syria's air defence systems in order to improve military cooperation between the

two countries," Iranian state TV quoted armed forces chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri as saying.

The deal will "further enhance our will... to confront pressures by America," he added.

Along with Moscow, Tehran has played a key role supporting Assad in the war that has ravaged the country and killed more than 380,000 people, displacing millions.

Israeli strikes have meanwhile targeted government troops, allied Iranian forces and fighters from the Iran-backed Lebanese

Shiite militant group Hezbollah. Syria was one of the few countries that helped Iran during the 1980-88 war with Iraq, and Tehran and Damascus signed a deal in 2006 sealing their military alliance.

State TV's website on Wednesday published a video of Bagheri and Syria's Defence Minister Ali Ayoub signing the latest agreement in Damascus.

It shows an Iranian military spokesman reading a joint statement saying the "comprehensive military-security agreement"

aims to "confront increasing dangers (and) takfiri terrorism supported by international and regional powers".

Iranian officials use the term "takfiri" to refer to Sunni jihadists, including groups fighting in Syria.

'Strategic and firm'

Syrian state news agency SANA quoted Ayoub calling Syrian-Iranian ties "strategic and firm".

"Bilateral military and security cooperation is qualitative and ongoing... despite increasing pressure and the mounting severity of threats," he said.

Ayoub vowed to confront "any new challenges with more determination ... with the efforts of all the Syrian people and cooperation with friends and allies determined to confront terrorism in all its forms."

The joint statement Wednesday also demanded "the withdrawal of all foreign armed forces having entered Syria illegally".

Turkey and the US-led coalition against the Islamic State group have both sent troops to

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Syria, despite objections from Damascus.

The latest deal between Iran and Syria comes after the US in late June urged the UN Security Council to extend a ban on conventional arms sales to Tehran, set to expire in October.

The lifting of the embargo, agreed under the landmark 2015 Iran nuclear treaty, would allow the country to obtain battle tanks, combat aircraft, warships and missiles or missile systems.



The Trump administration, which pulled out of the 2015 accord in 2018, has warned it could employ a disputed legal move to restore wide UN sanctions on Iran if the Security Council does not prolong a ban.



Washington's European allies have voiced support for extending the embargo but also oppose new sanctions, saying the bigger issue is Iran's nuclear programme.

The nuclear accord has been on life-support since the US withdrew from it and reimposed crippling unilateral sanctions on Iran.

A UN embargo on materials, goods, equipment and technology that Iran could use for its ballistic missile programme is to remain in place until 2023.

Pompeo hints at Iran links in killing of Iraq expert

Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday demanded justice over the killing of a prominent Iraqi jihadist expert and highlighted threats against him by Iran-linked groups.

Hisham al-Hashemi, an internationally known scholar whose vast contacts inside Iraq made him a mediator among rivals, was gunned down outside his Baghdad home late Monday by masked assailants on motorcycles.

"In the days leading up to his death he was repeatedly threatened by Iran backed armed groups," Pompeo told a news conference in Washington, without explicitly blaming Tehran.

"The United States joins partner nations in strongly condemning his assassination and call(ing) for the government of Iraq to bring to justice the perpetrators of this terrible



The poster of slain Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashemi in Baghdad

crime... swiftly," he said. Hashemi was an authoritative voice on Sunni extremist movements including the Islamic State group, which are violently opposed to Iran.

But he infuriated Tehran-backed factions in Iraq's Hashed al-Shaabi military network through his support of popular protests last year against a Baghdad government seen as too close to Iran.

Some experts have voiced fear of a new violent phase in Iraq and believe the turning point may have come in January when a US strike in Baghdad killed a top Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani.

Ethiopia violence death toll rises to 239

AFP | Addis Ababa

The death toll from demonstrations and ethnic violence that erupted in Ethiopia last week following the murder of a popular singer from the Oromo ethnic group has risen to 239, according to a tally of police figures.

Pop star Hachalu Hundessa, a hero to many Oromo who saw him as the voice of their marginalisation, was shot dead by unknown attackers on Monday of last week, fueling ethnic tensions threatening the country's democratic transition.

Protests broke out in the capital Addis Ababa, as well as the surrounding Oromia region which is the homeland of the country's largest ethnic group, who have long felt economically and politically sidelined in the diverse nation.

Officials have attributed the deaths to a combination of lethal force by security officers and inter-ethnic violence.



Protests even broke out in the Oromo community in the US state of Minnesota over the musician's death

"Due to the unrest that occurred in the region, nine police officers, five militia members and 215 civilians have lost their lives," acting Oromia police commissioner Mustafa Kadir said on state television on Wednesday.

Police in Addis Ababa had

previously reported 10 deaths in the capital.

The death toll is an increase from 166 fatalities reported at the weekend.

Mustafa also said there had been "extensive damage and looting" of government and private property.

"To control this unrest more than 3,500 suspects have been arrested. They were anti-peace elements who carried out attacks using the artist's death as a pretext to dismantle the constitutional system by force," he said.

"The Oromo population should be inclusive of other ethnic groups that live among it."

Threat to planned democracy

Hachalu's music was the soundtrack to anti-government protests that swept Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the country's first Oromo leader, to office in 2018.

Yet, as Ethiopia prepares for elections that will test its democratic transition under Abiy, many Oromo nationalists feel betrayed, arguing the prime minister has failed to champion their interests.

Free and fair elections planned for August have been postponed due to the coronavirus epidemic.

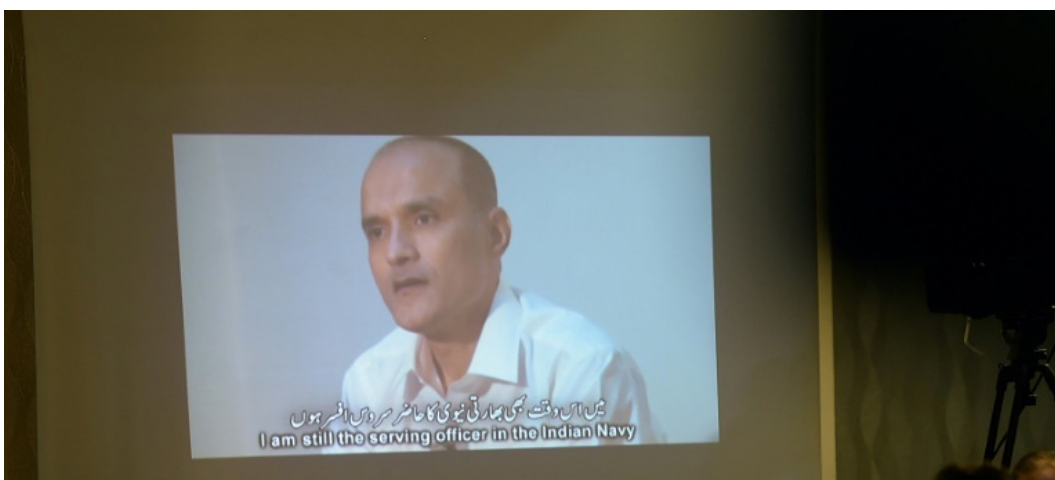
Former India navy officer refuses to appeal spying death sentence

AFP | Islamabad

Former Indian naval officer on death row in Pakistan for alleged spying has refused to lodge an appeal against his conviction, an official said yesterday, and will try for a military pardon instead.

Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav was arrested in 2016 in Pakistan's restive southwestern province of Balochistan -- a region where Islamabad has long accused New Delhi of backing separatist rebels.

He was sentenced to death by a closed Pakistani military tribunal in 2017, but the Interna-



Former Indian naval officer Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav was shown on TV after his arrest in Pakistan on spying charges

Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav was arrested in 2016 in Pakistan's restive southwestern province of Balochistan -- a region where Islamabad has long accused New Delhi of backing separatist rebels.

"Commander Jadhav refused to file a petition for the review and the reconsideration for his sentence and conviction," said attorney general official Ahmad Irfan.

"He instead preferred to follow up on his pending mercy petition", Irfan added.

He said Pakistan had written to the Indian high commission inviting it to file an appeal on Jadhav's behalf.

New Delhi maintains Jadhav retired from the navy in 2001 and was running a logistics business in Iran, where he was kidnapped and brought to Pakistan and forced to confess.

tional Court of Justice ordered Islamabad last year to review the sentence, and he was later offered the right to appeal.