

# Squabble over venue latest hurdle in Taliban-US talks

**KABUL:** Efforts to negotiate a peace deal to end the 17-year war in Afghanistan, already beset by disagreement about the agenda, are facing a new hurdle over the venue for the talks. Last week, Taliban leaders called off a fourth round of talks with US officials in the Arab Gulf state of Qatar due to an "agenda disagreement", and refused to allow "puppet" Afghan government officials to join.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy for peace in Afghanistan, is holding talks with regional powers and was expected to meet the Taliban in the coming days. But diplomatic sources said differences over the venue had caused a delay. "Saudi Arabia and the UAE (United Arab Emirates), have made it clear that they will not participate in the peace talks if the meeting takes place in Qatar. But the Taliban insists on holding them in Qatar," said a Kabul-based diplomat whose country shares a border with Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab nations severed ties with Qatar in 2017, alleging that Doha funded militants and had close ties to Iran. Qatar denied funding militants, but restored diplomatic relations with Iran after the crisis with its neighbors. Washington has pushed the Gulf nations to end their dispute at a time when their support is crucial in talks with the Taliban. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who stopped in Doha on Sunday during a Middle East tour, said the rift between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors had gone on for too long.

The Taliban this month pushed to shift the venue for the talks from Saudi Arabia to Qatar in a bid to fend off Riyadh's bid to include the Afghan government in them. "Differences between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have in fact damaged our peace process. The Saudis unnecessarily put pressure on us to announce a ceasefire which even the US delegation didn't pursue," a Taliban leader,

who declined to be named, told Reuters. The Saudi and UAE embassies in Kabul declined to comment.

The Afghan government said yesterday that attempts to introduce bilateral rivalries were an added complication for the peace process. "Unfortunately, the kind of rivalry which has started between the regional countries about the peace process has proved harmful to Afghanistan," Mujiburrahman Rahimi, a spokesman for Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah was quoted as saying by Tolo News, Afghanistan's largest private broadcaster.

The tensions underscore what diplomats say is a lack of consensus among powers in the region, whose support is crucial for long-term peace in Afghanistan. "There is a whole load of posturing. They are not monolithic," a Western diplomat in Kabul said of Afghanistan's neighbors. A senior Iranian diplomat said holding the peace talks in Saudi Arabia would be

unacceptable to Tehran. "The US officials want the venue to be in Saudi Arabia, but we are not comfortable," he said.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid declined to confirm the date or location of the next meeting, though a senior Taliban source told Reuters it could take place today. The Taliban regards the United States as its main adversary in the Afghan war and views direct talks with Washington as a legitimate effort to seek the withdrawal of foreign troops before engaging with the Afghan government.

"Even though there are a number of discussions, there's nothing particularly formal or structured or substantive to them," said Michael Kugelman, a South Asia specialist at the Woodrow Wilson Center. "It's very easy to get sidetracked, and it's easy for the Taliban to back out when it feels any one discussion doesn't serve its interests," he said. — Reuters

## Pakistan university rebrands Valentine's Day as 'Sister's Day'

**ISLAMABAD:** A Pakistani university is rebranding Valentine's Day as "Sister's Day", and debating marking the holiday widely seen as a Western import by handing out headscarves and shawls to its female students. The University of Agriculture in Faisalabad (UAF), in central Punjab province, said the change was taken to promote "eastern culture and Islamic traditions among the youth". "In our culture, women are more empowered and earn their due respect as sisters, mothers, daughters and wives," UAF vice chancellor Zafar Iqbal is quoted as saying on the institution's website.

"We were forgetting our culture, and Western culture was taking root in our society," he continued. "UAF was mulling a plan to distribute scarves, shawls and gowns printed with the UAF insignia among female students" on February 14, the statement on the website added. University spokesman Qamar Bukhari told AFP yesterday that UAF is seeking donations as it aims to give headscarves to at least 1,000 of its 14,000 female

students. "These scarves will be distributed by the university administration and not their fellow male students," he added, saying that the goal is to ensure respect for women.

Valentine's Day is increasingly popular among younger Pakistanis, with many taking up the custom of giving cards, chocolates and gifts to their sweethearts to mark the occasion. But the country remains a deeply traditional Muslim society where women have long struggled for their rights, and many disapprove of the holiday as a Western import. Pakistan's President Mamnoon Hussain told a crowd of students in 2016 that the day had no place in the Muslim-majority nation and urged young people to focus on their studies instead.

A rising Pakistani social media star, Qandeel Baloch, responded by posing in a plunging scarlet dress and posting a video message refuting his call. Baloch, whose provocative selfies deeply polarized Pakistan, was murdered by her brother later that year. In 2017, the Islamabad High Court prohibited Valentine's celebrations in public spaces and government offices across the country, while last year the country's media regulator warned TV and radio stations against promoting the holiday. On social media many rejected the UAF initiative - some joking that "Sister Day" could also be seen as a reference to the Hindu festival of Raksha Bandhan, in which brothers vow to protect their sisters. Pakistan sees neighboring India, where Hinduism is the dominant religion, as its archenemy. — AFP

## 15 killed in Iran plane crash...

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The Amir extended his condolences in a cable he sent to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, saying he was distraught over the tragic loss of life caused by the aircraft mishap. III the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and III the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar messages to the Iranian president. National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanim also sent a cable of condolences to Speaker of Iran's Shura Council Ali Larijani expressing his sincere grief.

The charred remains of a plane's fuselage with Iranian Air Force colors, its nose wedged through the wall of what appeared to be a house, were seen in photographs obtained by AFP. Wreckage including a landing gear and a mangled jet engine were scattered nearby. "A (Boeing) cargo 707 plane carrying meat took off from Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and had an emergency landing at Fath airport this morning," the army said earlier in a statement on its website. "It exited the runway during the landing and

caught fire after hitting the wall at the end of the runway."

Fath airport is in Alborz province, just northwest of Tehran. The Fars news agency, considered close to the military, earlier said there were 16 people onboard and that only the flight engineer had survived. State broadcaster IRIB showed footage of burning wreckage. Investigators found a black box from the plane, which will provide more details about the crash, deputy Alborz governor Azizollah Shahbazi told Tasnim news agency. Pictures published by local media showed the charred carcasses of the animals on board, still smoldering inside one of the buildings the plane smashed into. Fars carried a video showing emergency teams cutting through the aircraft's nose, which had penetrated what it said was an empty residential complex.

Iran's ageing air fleet has had a string of crashes in recent years. Iran's Aseman Airlines was ordered to ground its fleet of ATR planes in February last year after one of them crashed in the Zagros mountains, killing all 66 people onboard. Iran has been subject to tough US sanctions for years, hindering the purchase of new aeroplanes and critical spare parts for the US-made planes in its air force, civilian flag carrier Iran Air and domestic airlines. Hopes for a change in the situation were dashed last May when Washington pulled out of a landmark 2015 deal over Iran's nuclear program, reimposing sanctions that had been lifted as part of the multilateral accord.—Agencies

## Pompeo postpones Kuwait visit to...

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Pompeo walked a diplomatic tightrope on his second politically sensitive visit to Saudi Arabia since Khashoggi's murder as he demanded that all those involved in the crime be held accountable. The king and crown prince "both acknowledge that this accountability needs to take place", Pompeo said in Riyadh following talks with them. "They reiterated their commitment," he added. Relations between Riyadh and Washington have remained strained after journalist Khashoggi was murdered on Oct 2 inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, which Riyadh said was carried out by "rogue" Saudi agents. Pompeo's meeting with the crown prince lasted around 45 minutes. The US diplomat appeared more reserved than his previous visit at the height of the Khashoggi affair, when his broad smiles with the crown prince outraged many Americans.

Riyadh prosecutors have announced indictments against 11 people and are seeking the death penalty against five of them. US President Donald Trump has said Washington wants to preserve the alliance with the oil-rich kingdom, which he sees as a bulwark against common foe Iran and a lucrative buyer of US arms. Furious over the murder, US lawmakers have demanded Washington pull back its support to the Saudi-led military campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

But backing the Saudi position, Pompeo accused the rebels of failing to comply with a truce agreement for the lifeline port city of Hodeida reached last month at UN-sponsored talks in Sweden. "The work that was done in Sweden on Yemen was good, but both sides (need) to honor those commitments," Pompeo said. "Today, the Iranian-backed Houthis have chosen not to do that." Pompeo yesterday said he discussed human rights issues with the Saudis, including the plight of women activists, without giving any details.

Pompeo was in Riyadh as part of an extensive week-long trip to the Middle East, which included stops in Amman, Baghdad, Cairo, Manama, Abu Dhabi and Doha. After Riyadh, Pompeo wrapped up his Middle East tour



**RIYADH:** US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the Royal Court yesterday. — AFP

with a trip to Muscat. Pompeo met Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani on Sunday in Doha, where he refused to comment on reports Washington had recently considered military action against Tehran.

He also called on Qatar and other Gulf Arab countries to end their worst political rift in years, which has seen Doha diplomatically and economically isolated by neighboring former allies for the past 19 months. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt - all US allies - cut ties with Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of supporting terrorist groups and seeking closer ties to Saudi archrival Iran. Qatar - also a US ally - denies the allegations and accuses the countries of seeking regime change. "As for the GCC... we are all more powerful when we're working together when we have common challenges in the region and around the world," Pompeo said, referring to the six member nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council. He added that "President Trump and I both believe the ongoing dispute in the region has gone on too long". Mediation efforts by the United States, which at first appeared to back the boycott of Qatar, have stalled, as highlighted by the recent resignation of US envoy Anthony Zinni. For Washington, turning the page on the crisis is essential for the successful launch of the Strategic Alliance of the Middle East (MESA), a NATO-style security pact that includes Gulf countries as well as Egypt and Jordan. — Agencies

a deep diplomatic dispute with the UAE and Bahrain, in part over the direction of Doha's regional foreign policy in recent years. Qatar has been instrumental in the Syrian civil war supplying weapons to rebel groups, according to institutions such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Syria's opposition leader Nasr Al-Hariri has pleaded with Arab leaders not to rebuild relation with Assad as his government now controls almost two-thirds of the country following military backing from Russia and Iran. Sheikh Mohammed was speaking at a press conference announcing Qatar had agreed to commit \$20 million to an African Union fund to help cover costs to return illegal African refugees stranded in crisis-hit Libya in north Africa to their home countries.

AU chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat said the money was vitally needed. "I hope this is the beginning for a solution to a very, very difficult issue," he said. "Since last year, we have brought back 30,000 migrants from Libya to their own countries, but the number is bigger than that." The issue of migrants departing from Libya, particular to Europe, has become a major political and social headache for several countries. Italy's interior ministry said this month that some 23,270 people landed in Italy in 2018, most of whom had set off from Libya. — Agencies

## Turkey vows not to be intimidated...

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Turkey views the YPG as a "terrorist offshoot" of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been waging an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. The PKK is blacklisted as a terrorist organization by Ankara, the United States and the European Union. Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said Ankara would "continue to fight against them all", referring to IS and the YPG. Kalin added it was "a fatal mistake to equate Syrian Kurds with the PKK".

There has been growing friction between Turkey and the US over the fate of the YPG, especially after Pompeo this month said Washington would ensure Turkey would not "slaughter" Kurds. And before a visit to Ankara last week, White House National Security adviser John Bolton said the US retreat was conditional on the safety of the Kurdish fighters, provoking angry retorts from Turkish officials. The threat of new sanctions hit the Turkish lira which weakened before 1400 GMT to reach 5.49 to the US dollar, a loss of nearly one percent in value on the day.

Washington previously hit Ankara with sanctions last August over the detention of an American pastor in Turkey, causing a dramatic fall in the lira's value. But to Turkey's relief, the US sanctions were later lifted after Pastor Andrew Brunson was released by a Turkish court in October. Turkey previously launched military offensives in northern Syria in 2016 and 2018 respectively against IS and the YPG. In early 2018, Syrian rebels backed by Turkish military forces captured the YPG's

northwestern enclave of Afrin.

Ankara, which supports Syrian opposition fighters, is also involved in the last rebel bastion of Idlib, where Turkey has agreed a buffer zone deal with Damascus ally Russia. But the deal has not stopped an assault by militants in Syria. Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), an alliance led by militants from Al-Qaeda's former Syrian affiliate, last week extended its administrative control over the whole of the Idlib region.

Syria's National Coalition, the leading opposition body, on Sunday called for a "radical solution" to put "an end to its (HTS) presence" in Idlib. "If Idlib is a terrorists' nest, those responsible are not the Syrians who live in the region or Turkey but the regime and the countries which support (Damascus)," Cavusoglu said, claiming that the statements that HTS took 50 percent of Idlib are "not true". Cavusoglu added the Idlib deal was being "successfully applied" and that "our teams are working together to solve the minor issues".

The head of HTS yesterday voiced support for Turkey's plans to attack Kurdish forces. Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani did not offer direct military support but made clear he supported the YPG's removal from eastern Syria. "We consider the PKK to be an enemy of this revolution. It controls areas inhabited by large numbers of Sunni Arabs," he told the HTS-affiliated Amjad media outlet, referring to the YPG. "We are in favor of this region being liberated from the PKK," Jolani said. "We would not stand in the way of an operation against an enemy of the revolution."

Jolani has tried to cast himself as a leader of the anti-regime camp but many opposition factions blame him for tarnishing the image of the rebellion against the rule of Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad and ultimately causing its failure. Since Russia threw its military might behind him in 2015, Assad has reclaimed much of the ground lost in the first years of Syria's conflict. — Agencies

needs," he told AFP.

Iraq has witnessed a revolving door of diplomatic visits since Trump went in late December. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a surprise stop in Baghdad on his regional tour last week, followed by Iran's oil minister then top diplomat Mohammad Javad Zarif. Zarif landed Sunday and met with Abdel-Mahdi yesterday, according to the premier's office. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian also met Abdel-Mahdi yesterday morning and said the two countries had entered "a new stage" in their ties. The premier said he appreciated France's "support" to Iraq and hoped for greater economic cooperation.

Fanar Haddad, an Iraq expert at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, said the flurry of visits showcased Iraq's "major advantage". "From Iran to the United States, Saudi Arabia to Turkey, Syria to Qatar, Iraq can speak to everyone in a region that is otherwise deeply fractured by several strategic fissures," Haddad told AFP. But it also leaves Baghdad vulnerable to regional power struggles. "One of the most potent threats to Iraqi stability today is the danger of US-Iranian tensions escalating and playing out in, and at the expense of, Iraq," said Haddad.

That could thwart Iraq's plans to rebuild after three gruelling years recapturing urban strongholds from IS. Yesterday, two shepherds were found dead after being kidnapped by IS near Tikrit, around 175 km north of Baghdad, according to police sources. It came a day after seven Iraqis were sentenced to death for "terrorism"-related charges. — AFP

## Qatar rejects ties with Assad...

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Sheikh Mohammed added that Damascus under Assad should not be allowed back into the Arab League - its membership was suspended in 2011 - as "the Syrian people are still under bombardment... by the Syrian regime". His comments come after Gulf neighbors the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain announced late last month they reopened their Damascus embassies. The UAE's foreign minister Anwar Gargash tweeted that his country was doing so in part because of the influence of Iran and one of Qatar's strongest allies, Turkey, in Syria.

Tehran has been a staunch supporter of Assad's government and has expanded its military footprint in Syria throughout the course of the conflict. That move also emphasized the foreign policy differences between the three Gulf states. For the past 19 months Qatar has been in