

Foreign forces re-designing northern Syria puzzle

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 03:53

ANKARA: While all eyes are now on the unfolding developments in Libya and the East Mediterranean, Turkey's pro-government daily Yeni Safak reported significant changes in the deployment of foreign forces in northern Syria.

The US is setting up two new military posts in Syria, one in Himo village in Qamishli, and the other in Qahtaniya, to boost its footprint along the Turkish-Syrian border.

US troops, increasingly, find themselves neighbors to Russian soldiers and Syrian forces loyal to President Bashar Assad.

The presence of the US forces, 600 according to US Defense Secretary Mark Esper, is supposedly to help the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia against Daesh, and to monitor the area. They will also protect local residents and key infrastructure, such as oil fields, from external attacks.

In accordance with a US-brokered deal, YPG forces have withdrawn 30 km from the border to allow Turkey to set up a so-called "safe zone" using members of the anti-regime Syrian National Army (SNA).

In the meantime, Russia, deploying troops to bases previously evacuated by US forces, has expanded its presence around Qamishli.

Alexey Khlebnikov, an analyst at the Russian International Affairs Council, said Turkey considers the YPG the Syrian extension of the PKK, which has waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkish state. It would therefore not be pleased at US support for the militia.

"The Kurdish issue is the most important for Turkey in Syria, (but) it is unlikely that Ankara can do much militarily, with Russian, US and pro-Assad forces present," he told Arab News.

Human Rights Watch recently claimed it had found "damning evidence" of Syrian soldiers conducting summary executions, pillaging and other war crimes.

"Continued reports of atrocities by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army that now controls the area also raise fears that Turkish proxies are committing a form of ethnic cleansing by relocating people of Arab descent into the region, while preventing the Kurdish population from returning," Lara Seligman recently wrote in Foreign Policy.

Despite continued reports about the wrongdoings of the SNA in Syria, Khlebnikov said Ankara would not stop backing it.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in

Istanbul, said the continuing presence of the US in the area would continue while key assets remained under threat.

“Now the main concern of the American forces is to protect this (area). This is now the main goal of these new bases. They also want to send a message that they won’t abandon the Kurds with a complete withdrawal,” he told Arab News.

Turkey aims to settle at least one million Syrian refugees in northern Syria following the establishment of the infrastructure in the “safe zone.”

In the meantime, up to 50,000 Syrians are on their way to the Turkish border from the northwestern rebel-held province of Idlib, the country’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced on Thursday, with Russian and regime attacks pushing more and more refugees out of the province.

At least 24 civilians were reportedly killed by air strikes and artillery fire in Idlib on Tuesday.



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Hassan Diab set to be next Lebanon PM

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 03:33

BEIRUT: Lebanon has named academic and former education minister Hassan Diab as its next prime minister in a bid to end two months of political stalemate that has gripped the country.

Diab, vice president of the American University of Beirut, was nominated to head the next government by President Michel Aoun's parliamentary bloc, along with its allies Hezbollah, Amal Movement and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

The prime minister designate's first task will be to build a government capable of tackling Lebanon's worst economic turmoil for decades, while satisfying demands for change from the largest protest movement in almost two decades.

Diab secured the votes of 69 out of 128 members of Parliament on Thursday after caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri withdrew his candidacy and told Aoun his Future Movement parliamentary bloc would not participate in the next government.

However, the incoming premier failed to win a majority of Sunni, Druze or even Christian votes in the binding parliamentary consultations, raising questions about his ability to establish a stable leadership as the country struggles with rising unemployment and a collapsing economy.

The significant absence of Sunni and Druze votes also revealed changes in Lebanon's political alliances amid positioning for power in the future government.

Politicians close to Hezbollah and Amal tried to downplay the significance of the voting "gap" as they sought to head off objections to Diab's nomination.

Head of the Tawhid Party, Wiam Wahhab, said: "The Sunni opposition that named Diab won 40 percent of the Sunni votes in the parliamentary elections."

MP Qassem Hashem said: "The person who wins the majority of votes decides to accept or reject. Anything else is misplaced heresy."

However, Strong Republic MP Ziad Hawat described the consultations on Thursday as "a badly directed play in which all rules and regulations were violated."

He added: "This is a standard appointment exposed by the power of arms."

MP Paula Yacoubian said: "Those who are promoting Diab to head the government are trying to do so by using a minesweeper."

Diab, 60, was minister of education and higher education in Najib Mikati's government in 2011.

He appeared as a leadership candidate late on Wednesday after the Strong Lebanon bloc, Hezbollah and Amal agreed to nominate him following Hariri's withdrawal.

Hariri's parliamentary bloc, which includes 18 MPs, did not name anyone to head the government.

The Democratic Gathering bloc, which includes nine MPs representing Druze and Progressive Socialist Party loyalists, named former envoy Judge Nawaf Salam as its candidate, a decision backed by the Kataeb bloc, which includes three MPs.

Sami Gemayel, head of the bloc, said: "People want a neutral government and a prime minister who offers a new beginning."

Diab, who has a Ph.D. in computer engineering, won the votes of the Strong Lebanon bloc, which includes 19 MPs and is headed by MP Gibran Bassil.

He also won the votes of the Hezbollah bloc (13 MPs) and Amal (17 MPs).



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Lebanon talks for new PM begin Saad Hariri rules out returning as Lebanon's PM

[Haftar forces to target Turkish troops entering Libyan territory](#)

Thu, 2019-12-19 22:27

TRIPOLI: The Libyan Army has warned that it would target any Turkish forces entering Libya.

The threat came after Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), based in the capital Tripoli, approved the implementation of a military deal with Turkey, paving the way for a bigger role for Ankara in the conflict-hit country.

Brig. Khaled Al-Mahjoub, director of moral guidance in Khalifa Haftar's

Libyan National Army, said in statement to Al Arabiya, that it was unlikely Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan would send troops to Libya, “because this violates UN Security Council resolutions.”

He said any Turkish troops setting foot on Libyan territory would be considered “hostile” forces and legitimate target.

He added that the decision of GNA head, Fayeze Serraj, to activate the military cooperation agreement with Turkey was only “aimed at boosting his militia’s morale.”

A GNA statement said its Cabinet had “unanimously approved the implementation of the memorandum of understanding on security and military cooperation between the GNA and the Turkish government signed on Nov. 27.”

The GNA, which met in the presence of military officials, gave no further details about the terms of the agreement or the assistance Ankara could provide to pro-GNA forces facing an offensive by Haftar.

Erdogan said on Dec. 10 that Ankara was ready to send troops to Libya to support the GNA after the deal agreed on Nov. 27 in Istanbul with Sarraj.

“If Libya makes such a request from us, we can send our personnel there, especially after striking the military security agreement,” he said.

According to the UN, Turkey has already supplied military equipment to forces loyal to the GNA, including tanks and drones.



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[US investigation into Saudi Aramco attack says strikes came from north, 'likely Iran'](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Thu, 2019-12-19 16:26

WASHINGTON: The US said new evidence and analysis of weapons debris recovered from an attack on Saudi Aramco oil facilities on Sept. 14 indicates the strike likely came from the north, reinforcing its earlier assessment that Iran was behind the offensive.

In an interim report of its investigation – seen by Reuters ahead of a presentation on Thursday to the UN Security Council – Washington assessed that before hitting its targets, one of the drones traversed a location approximately 200 km (124 miles) to the northwest of the attack site.

“This, in combination with the assessed 900 kilometer maximum range of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), indicates with high likelihood that the attack originated north of Abqaiq,” the interim report said, referring to the location of one of the Saudi Aramco oil facilities that were hit.



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It added the US had identified several similarities between the drones used in the raid and an Iranian designed and produced unmanned aircraft known as the IRN-05 UAV.

However, the report noted that the analysis of the weapons debris did not definitely reveal the origin of the strike that initially knocked out half of Saudi Arabia's oil production.

"At this time, the US Intelligence Community has not identified any information from the recovered weapon systems used in the 14 September attacks on Saudi Arabia that definitively reveals an attack origin," it said. The new findings include freshly declassified information, a State Department official told Reuters.

The United States, European powers and Saudi Arabia blamed the Sept. 14 attack on Iran. Yemen's Houthi militias claimed responsibility for the attacks, while Iran, which supports the Houthis, denied any involvement. Reuters reported last month that Iran's leadership approved the attacks but decided to stop short of a direct confrontation that could trigger a devastating US response. It opted instead to hit the Abqaiq and the Khurais oil plants in Saudi Arabia, according to three officials familiar with the meetings and a fourth close to Iran's decision making.

According to the Reuters report a Middle East source, who was briefed by a country investigating the attack, said the launch site was the Ahvaz air base in southwest Iran, which is about 650 km north of Abqaiq.

Some of the craft flew over Iraq and Kuwait en route to the attack, according to a Western intelligence source cited by the report, giving Iran plausible deniability.

The 17-minute strike by 18 drones and three low-flying missiles caused a spike in oil prices, fires and damage and shut down more than 5% of global oil supply. Saudi Arabia said on Oct. 3 that it had fully restored oil

output.

The US will present its findings to a closed-door session of the UN Security Council as it hopes to mobilize more support for its policy to isolate Iran and force it to the negotiating table for a new nuclear deal.

The report noted that Yemen's Houthis "have not shown to be in possession, nor been assessed to be in possession" of the type of drones used in the attacks on the Aramco facilities.

Washington's interim assessment also included several pictures of drone components including the engine identified by the United States as "closely resembling" or "nearly identical" to those that have been observed on other Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles.

It also provided pictures of a compass circuit board that was recovered from the attack with a marking that is likely indicating a potential manufacturing date written in the Persian calendar year, the report assessed.

The name of a company believed to be associated with Iran, SADRA, was also identified on a wiring harness label from the Sept. 14 wreckage, the report said.

US President Donald Trump last year withdrew from a 2015 nuclear deal between world powers and Iran and snapped back sanctions on Tehran with the aim of choking Iranian crude sales, the Islamic Republic's main source of revenues. As part of its 'maximum pressure' campaign, Washington has also sanctioned dozens of Iranian entities, companies and individuals in a bid to cut off Tehran's revenue streams.



The rebirth of ALUla

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EU countries right to blame Iran for Saudi Aramco attacks: Al-Jubeir

[Iranian regime has transformed country into rogue state: Pompeo](#)

Thu, 2019-12-19 18:45

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Thursday that the Iranian regime has transformed the country into a "rogue state" over several decades of its governance.

In an address in Washington, Pompeo also urged Iranian officials to act as a "natural country" and to open the door of progress for the Iranian people.

He also confirmed the US's stance of standing with the Iranian people and its support for their demands being met.

Pompeo said: "The system is draining the money of the Iranian people to be spent in Syria and Yemen," in a reference to Iranian influence in the Middle East.

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