

Turkey releases 18 Syrian soldiers captured in Syria

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ISTANBUL: The Turkish military released 18 Syrian government soldiers captured in northeastern Syria by its forces, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Thursday.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said earlier that the soldiers were captured during Turkish reconnaissance operations southeast of Ras Al-Ayn but didn't say when.

Turkey agreed to a cease-fire brokered by Russia in which Kurdish fighters would withdraw 30 kilometers (19 miles) away from the Turkish border. As part of the deal, Syrian government forces would take positions along the frontier.

Akar spoke during a visit to Turkish troops at the border with Syria. His comments were carried on the official ministry website.

A Syrian Kurdish official said the soldiers were captured Tuesday during an intense battle between Syrian government forces and Turkey-backed fighters. Kurdish fighters were fighting alongside the Syrian troops. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief reporters.

In another sign of the changing battleground, US forces said the first batch of mechanized armored vehicles arrived in southeast Syria on Thursday, where they are to take part in securing oil fields and fighting remnants of Daesh. US-led Coalition spokesman Col. Myles Caggins said the first batch of Bradley armored infantry carriers arrived in Deir Ezzor Province and will provide infantry with maneuverability and firepower. He said the deployment is "de-conflicted" with other forces operating in the region.

The province is home to some of Syria's largest oil fields. It is also where Daesh militants continue to wage an insurgency and where they lost their last territory in March.

US President Donald Trump ordered the troop withdrawal from the north ahead of a Turkish military offensive there earlier this month. He said he wanted out of America's "endless wars" but would leave US troops in the region to secure oil facilities.

Turkey is pushing to have Kurdish fighters moved away from its borders.

Ankara views the Syrian Kurdish fighters as an extension of the decades-long Kurdish insurgency in southeastern Turkey. But Washington has partnered with those Kurdish-led forces to fight Daesh over the last five years, putting in a difficult spot between its NATO ally and battleground partners.

The Kurdish forces leaned on Russia and the Syrian government to protect them against the advancing Turkish forces. But Turkey seized a stretch of land across the border before the US negotiated an initial cease-fire.

Turkey has offered financial and logistical backing for the Syrian opposition

that worked to bring the government of President Bashar Assad down. Ankara has also carried out three military operations into Syria and now controls territory in northwest and northeast Syria to push Daesh militants and Kurdish fighters away from its borders.

Turkey then agreed to a cease-fire brokered by Russia on Oct. 22, under which Kurdish fighters would withdraw to 30 kilometers (19 miles) away from the Turkish border. Under the deal, Syrian government forces would take positions along the frontier and joint Turkish-Russian patrols are due to begin Friday. But the truce has been marred by accusation of violations from both sides. For days now, Turkey-allied fighters have been fighting Kurdish forces near Abu Rasein, a village between Ras Al-Ayn and Tal Tamr, despite the deployment of Syrian government forces. Syrian state media also reported some government soldiers clashed with the Turkey-backed forces.

The Kurdish official said the Syrian government soldiers were captured in the area. He said the forces then withdrew after their soldiers were captured. A war monitor group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, also reported that Syrian troops pulled out from the Tal Tamr area on Wednesday, amid a Turkish-backed advance with air cover. The area is home to Syria's dwindling Christian Assyrian community. The commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, Mazloum Abdi, warned that Turkey-backed fighters began entering Christian villages and are attempting to break into the main town. The Syrian withdrawal left empty the border post in Darbasiyeh, west of Ras Al-Ayn, which Kurdish forces had handed over just days before, according to the Rojava Information Center, an activist group. Later on Thursday, the Observatory said government and Kurdish forces were deploying into the town of Tal Tamr.

Separately, a car bomb went off in a town administered by Turkey-backed forces in northwestern Syria, killing at least eight people.

Turkey's official Anadolu news agency said another 14 people were wounded in the attack in a vegetable market in Afrin. It said the explosives were packed into a refrigerator truck.

Turkish-led forces captured Afrin from Syrian Kurdish fighters early last year. The area is controlled by Syrian fighters allied with Turkey, who have been accused by rights groups of seizing land and property. The area sees sporadic attacks and other violence.

Syria's state-run SANA news agency also reported the attack, saying nine people were killed and 20 wounded. It said the blast ignited a nearby patrol station and caused damage to surrounding homes and shops.

No one has claimed the attack.



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Car blast kills 8 in northwest Syria as US redeploys near Turkish border
Turkey detains 43 suspected Daesh members, foils plot: police

[Ivanka Trump to promote women's prosperity in Morocco](#)

Fri, 2019-11-01 01:38

WASHINGTON: Ivanka Trump is getting ready to promote her women's economic development program on an upcoming trip to Morocco.

It will be her third overseas trip this year to promote the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, which was launched in February to benefit women in developing countries.

US President Donald Trump's daughter and senior adviser will visit the North African country in early November, the White House said. Specific dates for

her travel were not released.

In a statement to The Associated Press, Ivanka Trump said the kingdom of Morocco is a valued US ally that has “taken strides” under King Mohammed VI to promote gender equality.

In August, she tweeted her support to the Moroccan government after it began the process of amending its inheritance laws, which say women should receive half as much as men.

Ivanka Trump will travel with Sean Cairncross, CEO of the Millennium Challenge Corp., an independent US foreign aid agency that provides grants to developing countries to help promote economic growth, reduce poverty and strengthen institutions.

They will meet with government officials and local leaders in Morocco’s capital, Rabat, and in Casablanca to discuss how to help women in the region gain a measure of economic independence.

The Women’s Global Development and Prosperity Initiative has a goal of helping 50 million women in developing nations advance economically over the next six years.

It’s a US government-wide effort that involves the State Department, the National Security Council and other agencies. It aims to coordinate existing programs and develop new ones to help women in areas such as job training, financial support and legal or regulatory reforms.

Ivanka Trump traveled to Ethiopia and Ivory Coast , in sub-Saharan Africa, in April and to Argentina, Colombia and Paraguay , in South America, in September to promote the initiative.



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Democrats to probe Ivanka Trump's private email use for gov't work

[EU Mideast envoy: Two-state solution 'only viable option' to end Palestinian conflict with Israel](#)

Thu, 2019-10-31 01:23

RIYADH: The EU's special representative for the Middle East peace process on Tuesday expressed her "optimism" for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but admitted a two-state solution was the only viable option.

Speaking to Arab News, Susanna Terstal said she was confident that the international community would ultimately find a way for Israelis and Palestinians to become "good neighbors."

During a visit to Riyadh, where she held meetings with senior Saudi officials, the diplomat said: "As special representative, I get a mandate from the member states to contribute to actions and initiatives leading to a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I work directly with all the member states and with high representative Federica Mogherini, maintaining close contact with all parties to the peace process.

"For the EU, international parameters are paramount. Like the League of Arab States (Arab League), we support a two-state solution, based on the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as a shared capital and a just solution for the refugee problem," she added.

Terstal noted that her three-day trip to Saudi Arabia, followed by talks in the UAE, was aimed at finding ways to work with Arab states on achieving their common goals.

On current progress of the peace process, she said: "I am an optimist, I always say and I believe at a certain point as an international community there will be a solution to the conflict, and Israelis and Palestinians will manage to find a solution and live in peace and security as good neighbors.

"That is our goal, of course, but what we see at the moment is that the

situation on the ground is deteriorating: West Bank and Gaza are split; and the settlements are growing.

“The humanitarian situation in Gaza is also a big concern to the EU. People in Gaza often do not have clean drinking water or electricity and the health situation is critical. We at the EU strive to alleviate those problems. Like Saudi Arabia, the EU is one of the biggest donors to the Palestinians,” Terstal added.

“With the EU and its member states in the past 15 years, we have spent €10 billion (SR41.6 billion). We spend that money for making the two-state solution possible. We do this to empower the Palestinian Authority, invest in rule of law, but also making sure the people can have a decent life. That’s why we also do projects in Gaza and are working on a large desalination plant there, with EU and Arab funding.

“But the ultimate goal is always a Palestinian state, in the framework of a two-state solution,” she said.

Terstal travels to Israel and Palestine every six weeks and frequently visits other countries in the region such as Jordan and Egypt. Part of her job is to liaise with European capitals to ensure they are all on the same page in terms of their approach to the Middle East peace process.

“We say that Jerusalem is the capital of both states and that Israel and the Palestinians should agree on a solution for the city through negotiations. It is also an important issue of course for the international community, because Jerusalem is the home of holy sites for Muslims, Jews and Christians and should be accessible to all.”

Asked about the shrinking Palestinian territory and expansionist policy of Israel, she said: “The UN Security Council resolutions are very clear on this and we believe that we should really fight for achieving two states. We realize it’s getting harder and harder with the passing of time and the expansion of settlements.

“But to us, the two-state solution remains the most viable option. And I think it is the same position here and that is what we are working for.”

During her visit to the Kingdom, Terstal held talks with various Saudi officials including Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir, General Supervisor of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) Dr. Abdullah Al-Rabeeah, and Secretary-General of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies Dr. Saud Al-Sarhan.

She noted the extensive aid work of KSRelief to help the Palestinians.

“We had very good discussions on how we can cooperate in the future. There are a lot of possibilities for peace, and it was very important for me to understand how the leaders in the Kingdom are looking at the conflict,” she added.



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Two states 'only solution' to resolve dispute, says GermanyUN chief says important Mideast peace efforts realize two-state vision

[Syria government, opposition launch 'historic' constitutional review](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-31 01:20

GENEVA: Syrian government and opposition negotiators sat face-to-face on Wednesday to launch a committee tasked with amending the country's constitution, a meeting hailed by the UN as marking "a new chapter" for the war-torn nation.

The UN-brokered constitutional review committee includes 150 delegates – divided equally among President Bashar Assad's government, the opposition and civil society.

Hopes remain dim that the group will reach a breakthrough toward a political

resolution to Syria's eight-year conflict, which has killed more than 370,000 people.

But UN Syria envoy Geir Pedersen said the meeting amounted to "a historic moment" and "a new chapter for Syria."

"I know that it is not easy for all of you to be here together," Pedersen said, conceding that "the road ahead will not be easy."

Experts have argued that Assad – whose forces have made major gains against the opposition – has little to lose at the talks and will walk away before making any significant compromises.

His lead negotiator Ahmad Kuzbari praised the country's existing charter as "a modern constitution."

"But this does not prevent us from meeting to consider possible amendments, or changes to the current constitution, and putting a new constitution in place, one that ... effects positive change," he added.

In opening remarks that also included tough rhetoric against those battling Assad, Kuzbari insisted that Syrian forces would continue fighting regardless of ongoing diplomacy.

"We have been fighting terrorism before the meeting, and we will wage this battle during the meeting and afterward, until we liberate every inch of our nation's precious land," he said.

The head of the opposition delegation, Hadi Albahra, described the meeting as "a first step on a long path to recovery."

"We all know that 150 people meeting today in this room have diverging opinions," he said.

"But after eight painful years of suffering in Syria we came here to look for similarities."

Following Wednesday's ceremony, meetings between the 150 will take place before a smaller group of 45 delegates will begin work drafting the constitution.

There is no deadline for the process and Pedersen said the aim would be to reach consensus on all issues.

Where that is not possible, changes would only be made with a 75-percent majority vote in the committee to avoid having any one side dictate the results.

Constitutional review is a central part of the UN's peace plan for Syria, which was defined by Security Council resolution 2254, adopted in December 2015.

The resolution also calls for UN-supervised elections.



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Syrian army clashes with Turkish forces in northeast border area Pullout of Kurdish forces in northern Syria complete: Moscow

[The post-Hariri resignation stage: Paving the way to assign a replacement](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-31 00:48

BEIRUT: Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced the resignation of his government in a move that suggested there is no winner in Lebanon. Neither have the two-week protests fulfilled all their demands nor has Hariri succumbed to some of the powers' rejection to bring about any government change.

At two in the afternoon on Wednesday was the deadline set by the Lebanese army command for the protesters to reopen all the roads they have blocked across Lebanon. This demand aimed to "reconnect all regions in accordance with the law and public order." The army command stressed "the right to protest in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and under the protection of the law in public squares only."

It was not easy to convince the protesters, who were adamant to continue to escalate, to leave the streets despite that their first demand, which is the resignation of the government, has been fulfilled.

There have been many debates between those who refused to leave the streets and those who are convinced that the squares should suffice in the next stage. Frustrated protesters have expressed outrage by accusing unnamed parties of having attempted to thwart the movement. Their high-pitched yelling expressed their disappointment, but everyone complied with the army command and left the streets.

Free Patriotic Movement ministers and MPs said in a statement that they were shocked by Hariri's decision to resign and that he had not coordinated with President Michel Aoun.

The pro-Hezbollah Al-Akhbar newspaper said that Hariri succumbed to external pressure and participated in the coup against the Covenant in light of the foggy events in the streets.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah had said last Saturday: "We do not accept overthrowing the Covenant, we do not support the resignation of the government, and we do not accept early parliamentary elections because this is a complicated issue."

On the fourteenth day of the protests, Lebanon entered the stage of the constitutional steps that follow the resignation, intensifying communication to restore the political situation. In the presidential palace, off-the-record active communication between President Aoun and his political allies took place to formulate a vision for the next political phase. The General Directorate of the Presidency issued a communiqué declaring that President Aoun has accepted Hariri's resignation and demands that the government continues to operate normally until a new government is formed. The communiqué did not specify the dates for parliamentary consultations to appoint a new prime minister to form a government.

The Association of Banks announced a tacit agreement to commence operation starting Thursday, but the banks' doors will remain closed to customers until a decision on this subject is taken in the coming days.

Walid Fakhreddine, political expert and civil movement activist, told Arab News: "The street is still intense as people have fulfilled their first demand to bring down the government, but we await the next stage. If no date is announced for the start of the parliamentary consultation to assign a new prime minister, we shall be ready. PM Hariri took responsibility and the ball is now in the court of the political powers."

He added: "The street has won so far, and the victorious party shall be determined through the political considerations in the formation of the next government. We shall watch and see if the politicians understand the street's demands and how they will seek to please it. The squares are available and have not been closed, and blocking roads is also accessible."

“People are exhausted but have not lost faith. It is true that we are now in the stage of catching our breath, but at the same time, we are observing. The key to the solution has been put in place—the government must resign, and if the political forces return to their previous ways for handling the protests, we shall be on the lookout.”

“The people overthrew the government that Hezbollah was preventing from getting overthrown, and this is the first political victory,” former MP Fares Souaid told Arab News.

“Even if some thought they can re-engineer political life and restore it to how it was before the protests, they will not be able to do that because the people who have tested themselves and their abilities will take to the streets again,” he added.

Souaid said: “In revolutions, the final results need time. Lebanon’s social media generation resembles that of Iraq, Khartoum and Algeria, and violence cannot be used against them. They have fought for Lebanon’s lifestyle, and their achievements deserve respect and encouragement.”

As part of the foreign reactions to the resignation of the government and the assault on protesters in Beirut, the embassy stressed Lebanon’s need for “a government capable of urgently implementing vital and necessary reforms to build a better country for everyone.” It also warned that “violence or intimidation by any group during peaceful protests will only contribute to undermining Lebanon’s unity and stability.”

UN Secretary-General António Guterres appealed for calm and restraint. He called on all political actors to seek a political solution that preserves the stability of the country and responds to the aspirations of the Lebanese people.

He also called on all actors to avoid violence and respect the rights to peaceful assembly and expression.



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