

Turkey warns US meeting with SDF chief would 'legitimize terrorists'

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ANKARA: Turkey on Friday warned Washington that any meeting with the leader of a US-backed Syrian Kurdish-led force risked "legitimizing terrorists." US President Donald Trump on Thursday said he had talked with Mazlum Abdi, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which fought against extremists in Syria, and that he had "really enjoyed" the conversation. In a tweet on Wednesday, Trump thanked Mazlum and said: "I look forward to seeing you soon," raising fears in Turkey of a possible face-to-face meeting between the two men in the United States.

"If you start legitimizing terrorists like this, tomorrow you will end up meeting with Baghdadi as well," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in televised remarks.

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi is the head of Daesh.

"It is not acceptable for our allies to meet with a terrorist wanted under a red notice," Cavusoglu told reporters in Baku.

"We have informed the US of all of this in a written note," the minister added.

Turkey says there is an Interpol red notice for Abdi, which Turkish NTV broadcaster reported had been issued in 2011.

A group of American senators including Lindsey Graham earlier this week urged the US State Department to expedite a visa for Abdi to enable a visit where he can speak to officials and lawmakers on the situation on the ground in Syria.

Turkish Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul earlier on Friday said if Abdi entered the US, "because there is a red bulletin, because there is an arrest warrant..., this person should be caught, arrested and extradited to Turkey."

Gul told reporters in the Turkish border town of Akcakale that Turkish diplomats had contacted their US counterparts to remind them that Abdi was a wanted individual.

Relations between Turkey and the US are particularly tense after Ankara launched a cross-border offensive on October 9 against the Kurdish YPG militia, whose fighters make up the bulk of the SDF.

But there have also been strains over Washington's failure to extradite Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen, accused by Ankara of ordering the 2016 failed coup. which Gulen has denied.



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[Lebanon's 9th day of protests witness rise in violence](#)

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Fri, 2019-10-25 10:05

BEIRUT: Lebanon's ninth day of anti-government protests witnessed a change in pace as clashes erupted between Hezbollah supporters, protestors and riot police, before and after the group's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's speech.

Several people were injured as both sides hurled projectiles at one another. It was a dramatic shift from the morning, when people in Beirut's Martyrs Square and Riad Al-Solh calmly set up stands of Lebanese merchandise, and vendors prepared their food offerings.

Riot police were forced to intervene between both sides in an attempt to deter the projectiles following Nasrallah's speech – which was decried as similar to an earlier address given by Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

"They're all the same: Hariri, Nasrallah, Aoun, Bassil," Alaa Mortada, one of the protestors, told Arab News.

"Look at what they're doing. Aren't we all Lebanese? This is why we need to remove religion from politics," he added.

A makeshift space for "Make-your-own banners" – right in between Martyrs Square and Riad Al-Solh <https://t.co/K4ZS3lSdvP>
[#LebanonProtests](https://t.co/K4ZS3lSdvP) [pic.twitter.com/VuxTox91e4](https://t.co/K4ZS3lSdvP)

– Arab News (@arabnews) [October 25, 2019](#)

Nasrallah continued to throw his weight behind the Hariri government, claiming that the protests were an "achievement" since they pushed the government to announce a budget with no tax.

"We don't accept toppling the presidency, we also don't back government resignation," he said, adding: "Lebanon has entered a dangerous phase, there are prospects that our country will be politically targeted by international, regional powers."

He ended the speech by urging his supporters to leave the protests. Several arrests were made following the clashes.

Similar scuffles broke out on Thursday night at the same site in central Beirut.

Following the scuffles more riot police with masks and batons were dispatched to the square to defuse the situation, which appeared to be growing more tense.

The demonstrators, who have thronged towns and cities across Lebanon prompting the closure of banks and schools, have been demanding the removal of the entire political class, accusing it of systematic corruption.

The protests are expected to continue throughout the night.

Numbers have declined since Sunday, when hundreds of thousands took over Beirut and other cities in the largest demonstrations in years, but could grow again over the weekend.

Lebanon's largely sectarian political parties have been wrong-footed by the cross-communal nature of the demonstrations, which have drawn Christians and Muslims, Shiite, Sunni and Druze.

Waving Lebanese national flags rather than the partisan colors normally paraded at demonstrations, protesters have been demanding the resignation of all of Lebanon's political leaders.



Volunteers clear trash in a mass clean-up in central Beirut on Friday, October 25, 2019. (AFP)

In attempts to calm the anger, Prime Minister Saad Hariri has pushed through a package of economic reforms, while President Michel Aoun offered Thursday to meet with representatives of the demonstrators to discuss their demands.

But those measures have been given short shrift by demonstrators, many of whom want the government to resign to pave the way for new elections.

"We want to stay on the street to realize our demands and improve the country," one protester, who asked to be identified only by his first name Essam, said.

"We want the regime to fall ... The people are hungry and there is no other solution in front of us," said Essam, a 30-year-old health administrator.

On Friday morning, protesters again cut some of Beirut's main highways, including the road to the airport and the coast road toward second city Tripoli and the north.

On the motorway north of Beirut, demonstrators had erected tents and stalls in the center of the carriageway.

But there was no sign of any move by the army to try to reopen the road.

In central Beirut, where street parties have gone on into the early hours, groups of volunteers again gathered to collect the trash.

"We are on the street to help clean up and clean up the country," volunteer Ahmed Assi said.

"We will take part in the afternoon to find out what the next stage will be," said the 30-year-old, who works at a clothing company.

Lebanon's Al-Akhbar newspaper, which is close to Hezbollah, headlined its front page "Risk of chaos," saying the movement had pledged to work to reopen blocked roads.

Hezbollah maintains a large, well-disciplined military wing.

Fares Al-Halabi, a 27-year-old activist and researcher at a non-governmental organization, said that "the Lebanese parties are trying to penetrate the demonstrations and put pressure on them or split them."

Lebanon endured a devastating civil war that ended in 1990 and many of its current political leaders are former commanders of wartime militias, most of them recruited on sectarian lines.

Persistent deadlock between the rival faction leaders has stymied efforts to tackle the deteriorating economy, while the eight-year civil war in neighboring Syria has compounded the crisis.

More than a quarter of Lebanon's population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank.

The post-war political system was supposed to balance the competing interests of Lebanon's myriad sects but its effect has been to entrench power and influence along sectarian lines.

– *With input from Reuters*







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NATO hammers Turkey on Syria operation

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Thu, 2019-10-24 17:36

BRUSSELS: NATO defense ministers Thursday slammed Turkey for its military operation in Syria conducted with Russia's help, but recognized there was little they could do to sanction their strategically important ally. The first day of a two-day meeting of the ministers in Brussels was dominated by the issue, with Turkey isolated among the 29 member states because of its incursion against Kurdish fighters it considers "terrorists" but who are key in the fight against the Daesh group in Syria. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described discussions as "frank and open" – euphemisms for sharp discord – and noted "we have seen disagreements before" but the transatlantic alliance has endured. He stressed that the ministers agreed on the need to "maintain our unity in the fight against Daesh," referring to the IS group being fought in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere by a broad international coalition including many NATO members. Germany presented an idea it floated this week of international troops being deployed to create a security zone in northeast Syria – a notion that has been met tepidly by allies because of the situation on the ground and the need for a UN mandate. The top commander of Syria's Kurdish force, Mazloum Abdi, welcomed the proposal, telling journalists in northern Syria that "we demand and agree to this." But the NATO ministers did not directly embrace the German plan. Stoltenberg said they instead stressed their "broad support... for ways to engage the international community to find a political situation" in northern Syria. Before the meeting, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer said she and her French and British counterparts believed a Turkish-Russian agreement to jointly patrol a "safe zone" inside northern Syria "does not

provide a permanent basis for a political solution.”

Belgium’s defense minister, Didier Reynders, said of Germany’s troops idea: “In principle we are in favor of such an agreement to work together – but then again, the situation is totally different now” following the Turkey-Russia agreement.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper, speaking at a think tank conference in Brussels before the NATO meeting, was blunt about Turkey, saying it was “heading in the wrong direction.”

“Turkey put us all in a very terrible situation and I think the incursion’s unwarranted,” Esper said.

He defended the withdrawal of “less than 50” US troops from northern Syria that cleared a path for the Turkish operation, arguing it was the only way to preserve the soldiers’ lives, and that in any case he was not “about to start a fight with a NATO ally.”

US President Donald Trump on Wednesday summed up American strategy in Syria by saying: “Let someone else fight over this long blood-stained sand.”

However on Thursday, he tweeted: “I appreciate what the Kurds have done. Perhaps it is time for the Kurds to start heading to the Oil Region!”

That referred to a non-Kurdish, crude-rich desert zone in Syria’s northeast under US control that Trump wants to prevent falling into the hands of the Syrian regime or its Iranian or Russian partners.

Turkey’s actions, its rapprochement to Russia and its threat to its European allies in NATO to unleash a wave of refugees if they dared criticize the assault in Syria have unnerved many in the transatlantic alliance.

“When we say we will open the gates, they are up in arms. Don’t be up in arms, the gates will be opened when the time comes,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a televised speech in Ankara.



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[Kurdish forces start Syria-Turkey border pullback](#)

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Thu, 2019-10-24 14:35

QAMISHLI, Syria: Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria left several positions along the long border with Turkey on Thursday, complying with a deal that

sees Damascus, Ankara and Moscow carve up their now-defunct autonomous region.

Russian forces have started patrols along the flashpoint frontier, filling the vacuum left by a US troop withdrawal that effectively returned a third of the country to the Moscow-backed regime of President Bashar Assad.

An AFP correspondent saw a Russian patrol set off from the town of Qamishli westwards along the Turkish border flying Russian flags, accompanied by Kurdish security forces.

US President Donald Trump has praised the agreement reached in Sochi by NATO member Turkey and Russia and rejoiced that US personnel were leaving the "long blood-stained sand" of Syria, leaving just a residual contingent behind "where they have the oil."

The deal signed in the Black Sea resort by Syria's two main foreign brokers gives Kurdish forces until Tuesday to withdraw to a line 30 kilometers (19 miles) from the border.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces had pulled out of some areas at the eastern end of the border on Thursday.

"The SDF have withdrawn from positions between Derbasiyeh and Amuda in the Hasakah countryside," the Britain-based war monitor's head, Rami Abdel Rahman, said.

Fighters of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – the main component of the SDF – remained in many positions along the 440 kilometer (275 mile) border, he added.

The Observatory also reported clashes near the town of Tal Tamr between SDF fighters and some of the Syrian former rebels paid by Turkey to fight ground battles.

SDF commander Mazloun Abdi on Twitter accused the Turkish-led forces of violating the truce on the eastern front of Ras Al-Ain.

"The guarantors of the cease-fire must carry out their responsibilities to rein in the Turks," he added on Twitter.

The events were set to provoke "forceful" discussion at a NATO defense minister meeting in Brussels on Thursday and Friday but Ankara risked little because of its strategic position, diplomats said.

Russian and Syrian government forces were deploying across the Kurdish heartland to assist "the removal of YPG elements and their weapons."

Kurdish forces had already vacated a 120-kilometer segment of the border strip – an Arab-majority area between the towns of Ras Al-Ain and Tal Abyad. The SDF withdrawal from that area came after Turkey and its Syrian proxies launched their deadly cross-border offensive on October 9.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is embattled on the domestic political front, hopes to use the pocket to resettle at least half of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees his country hosts.

Under the Sochi deal, the area will remain under the full control of Turkey, unlike the rest of the projected buffer zone which will eventually be jointly patrolled by Turkey and Russia.

Some 300,000 people have fled their homes since the start of the Turkish offensive and many Kurds among them seem unlikely to return.

US forces pulled back from the border area earlier this month, in a move the Kurds saw as a betrayal but which Trump had discussed since last year.

The autonomous Kurdish administration in Syria had hoped that the sacrifices

made in the name of the international community to help crush the Daesh group's "caliphate" would pay off.

But Trump has been keen to keep a promise to remove his troops from Syria, where IS's "caliphate" was eliminated in March but where conflict continues. "Let someone else fight over this long blood-stained sand," he said in a White House speech on Wednesday.

That "someone" is undoubtedly Russia, whose status as the main foreign power in Syria is now undisputed, to Assad's great benefit.

"Assad is getting back a third of Syria's territory without firing a shot," geographer and Syria specialist Fabrice Balanche said.

Some US forces remain in eastern districts of Syria, where government forces have been deploying but have not yet re-established full control.

"We have secured the oil and, therefore, a small number of US troops will remain in the area where they have the oil," Trump said on Wednesday.

The Syrian government is keen to reclaim the northeast, which is home to the country's main oilfields and some of its most fertile farmland.

In a phone call with Russia's defense minister and military chief on Wednesday, Abdi thanked Moscow for "defusing the war in our region and sparing civilians its scourge," the SDF said.



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