

Security Council warns of 'risk of dispersion' of Syria extremists

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Wed, 2019-10-16 17:35

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council warned in a unanimously adopted statement Wednesday of a risk of "dispersion" of extremist prisoners in Syria, but stopped short of calling for a halt to Turkey's offensive against Kurdish forces there.

"Members of the Security Council expressed deep concerns over the risks of dispersion of terrorists from UN-designated groups, including ISIL," the statement said, using an acronym for the Daesh group.

All 15 Council members including Russia, a key player in the conflict, declared themselves "very concerned (about) a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation" in northeastern Syria.

All were in agreement on the danger of Daesh regrouping, summed up a Western ambassador, who requested anonymity.

The short text proposed by France was adopted following a brief meeting held at the request of European members of the Council.

It does not condemn the Turkish offensive – which the United States is seen as having green-lighted by withdrawing troops from northeastern Syria – nor does it call for the operation to stop.

At a previous meeting late last week, Russia and China blocked the Council adoption of two separate texts calling for a halt to the offensive – one sponsored by European members Germany, Belgium, France, Britain and Poland – and the other by the United States.

Europeans and Americans on the Security Council have since been coordinating their efforts more closely, said a Western diplomat under cover of anonymity. Almost a week of deadly bombardment and fighting in northeastern Syria has killed dozens of civilians, mostly on the Kurdish side, and prompted at least 160,000 to flee their homes.

The Turkish invasion has also forced the withdrawal of several non-governmental organizations providing assistance to victims of the Syrian conflict, which has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since 2011.



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Trump officials rush to Turkey as Moscow fills Syria void from US retreat
Putin invites Erdogan to Russia amid Syria offensive: Kremlin

[Royal pardon for Moroccan journalist jailed for abortion](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2019-10-16 16:41

RABAT: Morocco's King Mohammed VI has pardoned Hajjar Raissouni, a journalist convicted last month of having extramarital sex and an abortion, along with her fiancé, a doctor and two of his colleagues, the justice ministry said on Wednesday.

The case of Raissouni, who had denied the charges against her, outraged rights activists who said she had been targeted for her work for a newspaper that has criticized the state, and because she is the niece of a prominent Islamist.



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[US envoy calls on UN to renew Iran arms embargo](#)

Wed, 2019-10-16 17:30

LONDON: The US special envoy to Iran said on Wednesday that the United Nations Security Council must renew the Iranian arms embargo, which is due to expire next year.

Under the Iran nuclear deal, which the US pulled out of last year, a UN ban on weapons sales to Tehran will come to an end in October 2020.

“Countries like Russia and China will be able to sell conventional weapons to Iran,” Brian Hook told a congressional hearing on US-Iran policy. “The Iranian regime will also be free to sell weapons to anyone.

“The moment Iran is allowed to buy advanced drones, missiles, tanks, and jets, it will do so. This will be a win for its proxies across the region,

who will use such arms to then attack other nations on Iran's behalf."

Since withdrawing from the Iran deal, the US has implemented what it calls an unprecedented pressure campaign on Iran, mostly through punishing rounds of sanctions.

The measures aim to "deny the regime the revenue it needs to fund a revolutionary and expansionist policy and to increase the incentive for Iran to come to the negotiating table," Hook said.

The hearing, described as a matter of pressing national security importance, explored the relationship the US and other countries maintain with Iran.

"If you look at the 40-year history that the US and other nations have had with this republic, you see a consistent pattern that requires either economic pressure, diplomatic isolation or the threat of military force and its is one or more of these factors that inform Iran's decision making calculus," Hook said.

Hook reiterated US President Donald Trump's willingness to meet with the Iranians and negotiate without preconditions.

"Unfortunately, Iran has responded to our diplomacy with violence and kinetic force and in recent months, Iran has launched a series of panicked attacks to intimidate the world into halting our pressure."

He said Iran was responsible for attacks on ships in a UAE port, an assault on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and a missile and drone attack on Saudi oil facilities last month.

Senator Jim Risch, the Republican chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also welcomed the joint statement from the UK, France and Germany following the attacks on the Abqaiq oil processing plant and Khurais oil field.

"Apart from rightly identifying Iran as the culprits, our partners addressed the importance of addressing regional security issues as well as the nuclear question," Risch said.

He said Iran's pursuit of regional domination following the 1979 revolution transformed the fabric of the Middle East and that the "Iranian regime dangerously catalyzed sectarian identities and weaponized sect and religion against its neighbors, triggering a Sunni/Shiite war that continues to unravel through the greater Middle East."

"The nuclear issue is but one aspect of the regime's malign conduct," Risch said, adding "every riyal and dollar we deny the regime is money not spent on terrorism."

Risch said one of his main issues with the nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was that it only touched on the nuclear aspects of Iran's behavior.

“Iran continues to threaten its neighbors with ballistic missiles, conducts criminal maritime activity in international waters, continues to unlawfully hold American citizens, and fuels dangerous proxy conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon,” he told the hearing.

“It is my assessment that the maximum pressure campaign against Iran is working and can serve as the bridge to more meaningful negotiations,” Risch said.

The hearing heard that since May of last year, over 30 rounds of sanctions have denied the regime of more than \$25 billion in oil revenue. The rial has plunged, inflation is around 50 percent and climbing and Iran’s economy is shrinking rapidly.

Hook said the US is seeking a comprehensive deal to address the threats that Iran presents to international peace and security “including their nuclear and missile programs and its support to terror groups and proxies.”



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[Brian Hook](#)

Iran must refrain from new reductions to nuclear commitments: FranceTurkish bank charged with evading US sanctions on Iran

Syrian and Russian troops sweep into Manbij as US withdraws

Tue, 2019-10-15 15:58

MANBIJ, Syria: Turkey ignored US sanctions and pressed on with its assault on northern Syria on Tuesday, while the Russia-backed Syrian army roared into one of the most hotly contested cities abandoned by US forces in Donald Trump's retreat.

Reuters journalists accompanied Syrian government forces who entered the center of the city of Manbij, a flashpoint where US troops had previously conducted joint patrols with Turkey.

Russian and Syrian flags were flying from a building on the city outskirts, and from a convoy of military vehicles.

US forces announced they had pulled out of the city.

A week after reversing US policy and moving troops out of the way to allow Turkey to attack Washington's Syrian allies, Trump announced a package of sanctions to punish Ankara.

But the measures – mainly a hike in steel tariffs and a pause in trade talks – were less robust than financial markets had expected, and Trump's critics derided them as too feeble to have an impact.

The Turkish lira, which had fallen on the expectation of tougher US measures, recovered after the sanctions were announced, as did its bond and stock markets, with traders noting that Trump had spared Turkish banks.

Trump's unexpected decision to withhold protection from Syria's Kurds after a phone call with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan a week ago swiftly upended five years of US policy in the Middle East.

The withdrawal gives a free hand to Washington's adversaries in the world's deadliest ongoing war, namely Syrian President Bashar Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies.

The United States announced on Sunday it was withdrawing its entire force of 1,000 troops from northern Syria. Its former Kurdish allies immediately forged a new alliance with Assad's Russia-backed government, inviting the army into towns across the breadth of their territory.

Russian-backed Syrian forces moved swiftly to fill the void left by departing Americans from Manbij west of the Euphrates river, which Turkey has vowed to capture.

"We are out of Manbij," said Col. Myles B Caggins, spokesman for the US-led coalition in Syria. Troops "are executing a deliberate withdrawal from northeast Syria."

A group of journalists accompanied by Syrian army personnel journeyed into Manbij city where upon their arrival a group of people gathered, waving the Syrian flag and pictures of Assad.

However the reporters left when gunfire was heard and a group of some 10 young men in Kurdish YPG uniforms began breaking cameras and yelling.

Syrian state media said SDF fighters had opened fire on a march organized by the people of Manbij to welcome the army.

Trump's pullout ends joint US-Turkish patrols of the Manbij area under a deal aimed to persuade Turkey not to invade.

Syrian state television broadcast footage of what it said was government troops entering Manbij on Tuesday, under their new deal with the Kurds. A resident inside the city told Reuters the Syrian troops were on its outskirts. Turkey-backed Syrian fighters said they would continue their advance toward Manbij.

A Reuters cameraman on the Turkish frontier reported heavy bombardment on Tuesday morning of the Syrian border town of Ras Al-Ain, where a spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces reported a fierce battle was taking place.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Trump has defended his reversal of US policy as part of a plan to withdraw the United States from "endless" wars in the Middle East.

But his critics, including senior figures in his own Republican Party, cast it as a betrayal of the Kurds, loyal allies who lost thousands of fighters as the principal ground forces in Washington's battle against Daesh.

The Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, said Trump's sanctions were too little, too late.

"His announcement of a package of sanctions against Turkey falls very short of reversing that humanitarian disaster."

Turkey says it aims to defeat the Kurdish YPG militia, which it sees as terrorists for their links to separatists in Turkey, and to create a "safe zone" where millions of Syrian refugees can be resettled.

The United Nations says 160,000 people have fled their homes as Turkish forces advance. The Kurdish administration puts the number of displaced at 270,000.

The UN Human Rights office said on Tuesday Turkey could be held responsible for war crimes by fighters under its direction, potentially including the assassination of Hevrin Khalaf, a leading Kurdish politician killed on the side of a highway on Saturday by gunmen who posted the incident on the Internet.

Turkish-backed fighters have denied blame for her murder.

Erdogan, who has pledged to continue military operations come what may, said Turkey was giving the world a chance to bring peace to the region.

"The international community missed its opportunity to prevent the Syrian crisis from pulling an entire region into a maelstrom of instability," he wrote in the Wall Street Journal. "The European Union – and the world – should support what Turkey is trying to do."

The Syrian army deployments into Kurdish-held territory evacuated by Washington are a victory for President Bashar Assad and his most powerful ally, Russia, giving them a foothold in the biggest remaining swath of the country that had been beyond their grasp.

Trump allies insisted Washington had not given its blessing to the Turkish

offensive, and demanded a cease-fire.

“The United States of America simply is not going to tolerate Turkey’s invasion in Syria any further,” Vice President Mike Pence said. “We are calling on Turkey to stand down, end the violence and come to the negotiating table.”

Trump’s sanctions include reimposing steel tariffs and halting talks on a trade deal. But bilateral trade between Turkey and the United States is small – around a tenth the size of Turkey’s trade with Europe. Washington’s most effective form of economic leverage would be to hinder Turkey’s access to US financial markets, a step Trump has so far avoided.

“The sanctions are not related to banking, so the markets will have a positive perception,” said Cem Tozge, asset management director at Ata Invest.

In a potentially more damaging blow, German carmaker Volkswagen said it was postponing a final decision on whether to build a 1 billion euro (\$1.1 billion) plant in Turkey, citing concern over “current developments” after international condemnation of the incursion.

European countries have criticized the offensive but have limited their response so far to announcing suspensions of arms sales, although weapons account for only a small fraction of EU-Turkish trade.

Trump said US troops would remain at a small garrison at Tanf in southern Syria “to continue to disrupt remnants” of Daesh. The base on the southern border is hundreds of miles away from the Kurdish area in the north that had previously been the main US theater.



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Erdogan vows no Daesh fighters will escape Syria
Kremlin envoy calls Turkish military operation in Syria 'unacceptable'

[Kremlin envoy calls Turkish military operation in Syria 'unacceptable'](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2019-10-15 11:53

MOSCOW: The Kremlin's envoy for Syria on Tuesday called Turkey's military offensive in northeast Syria "unacceptable" and denied Ankara's operation had been cleared by Moscow in advance, Russian news agencies reported.

Alexander Lavrentiev, Russian President Vladimir Putin's envoy for Syria, was speaking to reporters in Abu Dhabi during an official visit there by Putin.

He made his comments after Turkey ignored new sanctions from the United States to press on with its assault on northern Syria while the Russia-backed Syrian army entered one of the most hotly contested cities, filling a void created by Donald Trump's abrupt retreat.

When asked if there had been an advance agreement between Russia and Turkey about Ankara's operation, Lavrentiev was cited as saying:

"No. We had always urged Turkey to show restraint and always considered some kind of military operation on Syrian territory unacceptable."

Lavrentiev's comments, which suggest growing tensions between Turkey and Russian, came a day after the Kremlin complained that Turkey's incursion was "not exactly" compatible with Syrian territorial integrity.

"The security of the Turkish-Syrian border must be ensured by the deployment of Syrian government troops along its entire length," said Lavrentiev.

"That's why we never spoke in favor or supported the idea of Turkish units (being deployed there) let alone the armed Syrian opposition."

Lavrentiev said Turkey's actions risked upsetting delicate religious sensitivities in northern Syria.

In particular, he said the area was populated by Kurds, Arabs and Sunnis who would not take kindly to their lands being resettled by people who had never lived there, a reference to Turkey's plan to house refugees from other parts of Syria there.

Lavrentiev confirmed that Russia had brokered an agreement between the Syrian government and Kurdish forces that saw the Kurds cede control of territory to Syrian troops.

Those talks had taken place at Russia's Hmeimim air base in Syria among other places, he said.



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