

'Forgotten' war: Syria conflict a footnote at UN meeting

Author:

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BEIRUT: As dozens of heads of state convene for the annual UN General Assembly in New York this week, the lingering conflict in Syria is taking a back seat while tensions in the Arabian Gulf and global trade wars take center stage.

Now in its ninth year, many Syrians fear the unresolved war has become a footnote in a long list of world crises, with weary leaders resigned to live with Syria's Bashar Assad ruling over a wrecked and divided country for the foreseeable future.

On the eve of the global gathering in New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced that a long-awaited committee that would draft a new Syrian constitution has been finalized – a step the UN hopes will put the war-ravaged country on track for a political solution.

But few see any real chance that the committee can make significant progress toward that end.

"The world has forgotten about us – not that anyone cared about Syria to begin with," said Hussein Ali, a 35-year-old internally displaced father of two. He now lives with his family in one rented room in the opposition-controlled northern town of Azaz, near the Turkish border. "The rise of Daesh made the West care momentarily, but not anymore," he said, using an Arabic acronym for the Daesh group.

Most of Syria has returned to regime control after eight years of war. The exceptions are the opposition-held bastion of Idlib in the northwest, where fighters, militants and their families from all over the country have been cornered, and the oil-rich northeast, held by US-backed Kurdish groups.

A frozen conflict

The violence has largely tapered off in most of the country, but few among the nearly 6 million refugees scattered across the globe have returned. Many fear detention if they come home – or they simply have no homes to return to.

Entire towns and villages are in ruins. The West will not contribute to reconstruction plans as long as Assad is in power and other countries are unwilling to invest without there first being a political settlement.

In Idlib, a Russia-backed regime offensive to recapture the province continues to claim lives. Hundreds have been killed and more than 400,000 displaced in the past four months under Syrian and Russian airstrikes. But the bloodshed hardly makes a dent in global news.

“The world apparently has long since tired of the war, and resigned itself to frozen conflict, with a nationwide cease-fire as the best possible scenario,” said Heiko Wimmen, project director for Iraq, Syria and Lebanon at International Crisis Group.

Syria’s conflict was a domino effect of the so-called Arab Spring uprisings that began in late 2010, toppling dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. What started in March 2011 as largely peaceful demonstrations against the Assad family rule turned into an armed insurgency following a brutal regime crackdown. The conflict eventually became a proxy war pitting the US, Turkey and Gulf countries who supported the opposition, against Russia, Iran and Hezbollah who fought alongside the regime. In the chaos, extremists such as Daesh flourished, seizing a third of Syria and Iraq.

Nearly half-a-million people have been killed and half of Syria’s prewar population displaced. The opposition has been crushed for the most part, and Assad is widely considered to have prevailed militarily. Daesh militants who dominated the news for years have been defeated, although the group continues to stage sporadic insurgent attacks.

A tentative cease-fire has been in place in Idlib since the end of August, but there is no suggestion it will be anything other than a pause before regime troops and their allies regroup and relaunch their campaign.

“The Syrian regime appears determined to clench back every last bit of territory, without the tiniest bit of compromise,” Wimmen said. “As long as Damascus persists in its attitude, and is enabled by its foreign backers, the war will continue.”

Diplomatic efforts

While the world remains deadlocked over Syria, there is no initiative on the horizon to help resolve it. The UN’s current Syria envoy Geir Pedersen is the fourth to hold the post after the previous three resigned following years of mediating peace talks that led nowhere.

The constitutional committee announced on Monday is made up of 150 members divided equally among regime, opposition and civil society members. It is tasked with drafting a new Syrian constitution in talks facilitated by the UN in Geneva. Desperate for a breakthrough, Guterres touted it as “the beginning of the political path out of the tragedy toward a solution.”

Syria is scheduled to hold presidential elections in 2021, and the UN hopes the talks can help create a climate and mechanism for holding a neutral and fair vote. But with a clear military upper hand, Assad regime is unlikely to offer any concessions, and Syrian officials have suggested he will run again.

A Western diplomat called it an “important step” in the sense that talks overseen by the UN would provide some form of international scrutiny over the balloting.

“It will not be a solution for the war but rather a method to get a Syria platform going and try to be more inclusive than the two-side indirect

talks,” the diplomat said, referring to several rounds of talks between the regime and the opposition in Geneva overseen by the UN envoy. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive issues.

Underlining the distrust, Syrian lawmaker Safwan Qurabi said the committee is “sensitive and is also dangerous.”

“What is planned through this committee is to steal Syria’s political decision, which they couldn’t do through destructive military action,” Qurabi said, referring to the opposition and their foreign supporters.

Far from over

While the violence may have diminished, analysts say the war is likely to continue for a long time.

At its height, the conflict unleashed a global migrant crisis that continues to reshape Europe and neighboring countries that once opened their borders to millions fleeing war. That reception has chilled over the past year. Suffering an economic downturn and rising unemployment, the mood in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan has soured, and calls for the refugees to return home are growing.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says his country can no longer shoulder the burden of 3.6 million refugees it hosts, and earlier this month, he threatened to “open the gates” and allow a flood of Syrian refugees to leave Turkey for Western countries unless a so-called “safe zone” is established in Syria soon in negotiations with the US

The rising resentment against Syrians seems to be behind a new wave of migrants sailing from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos every day.

Erdogan used his speech at the UN on Tuesday to highlight the humanitarian cost of the war by holding up a photo of Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old boy whose lifeless body was found on a Turkish beach in 2015 and drew the world’s attention to the plight of refugees.

Erdogan said the world must “never forget” the world’s “baby Aylans.”

An all-out Syrian regime offensive to recapture Idlib, which seems inevitable, will likely have disastrous consequences, pushing hundreds of thousands of people toward the Turkish border.

“Assad won’t go away, since pushing him out is no longer an option, but neither is rehabilitating him, or rebuilding the country in his presence,” Wimmen said. “The status quo of misery will likely persist.”



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Syria 'captures' drone near Israeli-occupied Golan Heights
In Syria's Idlib, education a casualty of war

[US launches strike in southern Libya as UN warns of escalation](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-09-25 21:12

CAIRO: US forces said on Wednesday they killed 11 suspected militants in their second airstrike in a week near the southern Libyan town of Murzuq, as the UN envoy warned of a growing risk of armed escalation and rights abuses in the country.

The strike comes as rival factions have been locked in a battle around the capital Tripoli, about 800 km to the north, which forces loyal to eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar have been trying to capture since April.

The US attack, carried out on Tuesday deep in Libya's southern desert,

followed a Sept. 19 strike that the US said had killed eight suspected militants.

This airstrike was conducted to eliminate Daesh terrorists and “deny them the ability to conduct attacks on the Libyan people,” Maj. Gen. William Gayler, director of operations for US Africa Command, or AFRICOM, said in a statement.

AFRICOM said the Murziq area was also targeted in Thursday’s airstrike, which killed eight Daesh militants. Some Daesh militants retreated south into Libya’s desert as the group lost its stronghold in the coastal city of Sirte at the end of 2016.

The US, which has carried out occasional strikes in desert areas, has said it will not allow militants to use the fighting around Tripoli for cover.

The offensive on Tripoli by Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) upended UN-led plans to broker a political settlement in Libya and soon stalled in the capital’s outskirts.

The conflict has spread outside Tripoli, with air and drone strikes against the port city of Misrata, Sirte, and Jufra in central Libya, UN Libya envoy Ghassan Salame told the UN Human Rights Council on Wednesday. It had also triggered a “micro-conflict” in Murzuq, where more than 100 civilians are reported to have been killed over the past two months, he said.

“The conflict risks escalating to full-blown civil war,” Salame said by video link. “It is fanned by widespread violations of the UN arms embargo by all parties and external actors.”

“Serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law have been committed with total impunity, including increased summary executions, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment as well as conflict-related sexual violence.”

Libya has been divided between rival factions based in Tripoli and the east since 2014, three years after a NATO-backed uprising ended Muammar Qaddafi’s four-decade rule.

Haftar’s LNA is battling forces aligned with the Government of National Accord (GNA), which was set up in 2016 following a UN-brokered deal.

At least 128,000 people have been displaced by the fighting since April, according to UN estimates.



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Three killed in suspected Daesh attack on southern Libya: official
Libya airport hit by drone and rocket fire; 2 Haftar troops killed

[Israel president tasks Netanyahu to form new govt: statement](#)

Wed, 2019-09-25 20:08

JERUSALEM: Israel's president on Wednesday tasked Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with forming a new government after last week's deadlocked elections, his office announced.

The announcement followed a joint meeting between President Reuven Rivlin, Netanyahu and the premier's challenger Benny Gantz.

Netanyahu will have 28 days to form a government, with a possible two-week extension.

If all attempts fail, Rivlin can then assign the task to someone else.

Rivlin has been urging Netanyahu and Gantz to form a unity government, but a compromise appears a long way off.

Final results from September 17 elections gave Gantz's centrist Blue and

White 33 seats, ahead of Likud's 32 out of parliament's 120. Neither has a clear path to a majority coalition. Netanyahu received the endorsement of 55 members of parliament for the post of prime minister after the election, while Gantz received 54.



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Israel's main parties begin talks on coalition government
Israeli president meets Netanyahu, Gantz in bid to break deadlock

[Iran still holding British tanker despite lifting detention order](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-09-25 19:50

STOCKHOLM: British-flagged oil tanker Stena Impero is still being held in Iran, despite Tehran lifting a detention order on the vessel, its owner said on Wednesday.

Sweden's Stena Bulk said it was not in negotiations with Iran and not aware of any formal charges against the crew or the company.

Iran's foreign ministry said earlier that a lifting of the detention order had been finalized, but that an investigation into the vessel was ongoing.

"We haven't been accused of anything. Not through any formal letter or anything else to the company. We are still in the dark over why we are anchored in Bandar Abbas," Stena Bulk CEO Erik Hanell told Reuters by telephone.

He said the ship was fueled and ready to sail for a port in the United Arab Emirates as soon as it was cleared to leave.

Iranian forces seized the Stena Impero on July 19 for alleged marine violations two weeks after British marines detained an Iranian tanker off Gibraltar. The Iranian vessel was released in August.

The actions followed attacks on other merchant vessels in Gulf oil shipping routes which Washington blamed on Tehran. Iran has denied responsibility.

Hanell said tensions in the region had seen the company tighten security around its ships.

"Our British-flagged ships are now escorted by British frigates. We have a higher level of risk management now," he said.

The head of Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization, Mohammad Rastad, said on Monday the Stena Impero was free to depart from Bandar Abbas port after legal hurdles had been cleared.

Hanell said there were still Iranian guards on the ship and he had no idea why the ship had not been allowed to leave yet.

"We had a dialogue with them up until the end of last week. We thought everything was ready (for the ship to be released)," Hanell said.

Iran freed seven of the 23 crew members earlier this month and Stena Bulk has tried to get the rest out as well, in part by offering a crew exchange.

"We thought it would have been reasonable, but we weren't allowed to do it," Hanell said.



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UK, France, Germany blame Iran for attacks on Saudi oil facilities

[Lawyers: 3 Egyptian activists detained amid wave of arrests](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

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Wed, 2019-09-25 12:15

CAIRO: Egyptian lawyers say security forces arrested three political activists known for their outspoken criticism of Egypt's government and the

president.

Egypt has seen a wave of arrests following small but rare anti-government protests over the weekend. Police quickly dispersed the protests, but they marked a startling eruption of street unrest.

Demonstrations have been almost completely silenced in recent years under President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi.

The lawyers, Nour Farahat and Khaled el-Masry, say the three detained activists are Hazem Hosny, Hassan Nafaa and Khaled Dawood.

The lawyers said Dawood was arrested Wednesday. He's an opposition leader and former head of the liberal Al-Dustour party.

Hosny and Nafaa are both political science professors at Cairo University, and were arrested Tuesday. El-Masry says security forces have detained over 1,200 people in the last week.



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Egypt hands life sentence to Egyptian plane hijacker