

US, allies planning naval escort for Gulf tankers

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WASHINGTON: The United States and its allies are discussing plans to provide naval escorts for oil tankers through the Gulf, a top US general said Thursday after Iranian military vessels menaced a British tanker.

General Mark Milley, nominated to become the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Senate hearing that the US has a "crucial role" in enforcing freedom of navigation in the Gulf.

He said the US was attempting to put together a coalition "in terms of providing military escort, naval escort to commercial shipping."

"I think that that will be developing over the next couple weeks."

Milley, currently chief of staff of the army, confirmed less specific remarks by current Joint Chiefs Chairman General Joseph Dunford earlier this week.

Dunford told media that the Pentagon was working to identify possible partners in an effort to protect navigation in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandab on either side of the Arabian peninsula where much of the world's crude oil traffic passes.

Milley's remarks came after London said Thursday that armed Iranian boats tried to block a supertanker before being warned off by a British warship in a dramatic escalation in the Gulf.

The British defense ministry said three Iranian boats tried to "impede the passage" of the British Heritage, a 274-meter (899-foot) tanker owned by BP that can carry a million barrels of oil.

"We are concerned by this action and continue to urge the Iranian authorities to de-escalate the situation in the region," a Downing Street spokesman said.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards denied involvement but also cautioned both the United States and Britain that they would "strongly regret" the British detention of a tanker carrying Iranian crude oil off Gibraltar last week.



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UK ships on alert after British frigate thwarts Iranian attempt to stop tanker in Gulf
Trump accuses Iran of secret nuclear enrichment and warns of 'substantial' new sanctions

[Gibraltar police arrest captain, officer of detained Iran tanker Grace 1](#)

Thu, 2019-07-11 18:04

GIBRALTAR: Gibraltar police have arrested the Indian captain and chief officer of a seized Iranian tanker suspected of breaching EU sanctions by shipping oil to Syria, Royal Gibraltar Police said Thursday.

"This follows a protracted search of the vessel where documents and electronic devices have been seized and examined," police said in a statement.

Gibraltar police are interviewing both men, who have "been accorded their legal entitlements and access to consular representation," it added.

Gibraltar forces and British marines boarded the ship, Grace 1, and seized it

on July 4 off the coast of Gibraltar, saying they believed it to be destined for Syria to deliver oil, which is subject to European sanctions. Tests have shown the 330 metre (1,000 feet) tanker which is capable of carrying two million barrels of oil, was “carrying a full load of crude oil”, the government of Gibraltar said Monday. Iran has condemned the detention as an “illegal interception” and said the tanker was not headed to Syria. The arrests come after London said earlier on Thursday that armed Iranian boats tried to “impede” a UK supertanker in the Gulf before being warned off by a British warship. Iran’s Revolutionary Guards denied involvement but also cautioned both the United States and Britain that they would “strongly regret” the UK Royal Marines’ detention of the Grace 1. Gibraltar police said the investigation was still on-going and the tanker remained detained.



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UK ships on alert after British frigate thwarts Iranian attempt to stop tanker in Gulf
Trump accuses Iran of secret nuclear enrichment and warns of

'substantial' new sanctions

[New Kurdish PM makes Baghdad ties priority over independence](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-07-10 23:27

IRBIL: Two years after a failed independence bid plunged Iraq's Kurdistan Region into months of instability, the new regional prime minister said his priority was strengthening ties with Baghdad, signaling dreams of self-rule should be put on hold.

Masrour Barzani, sworn in as regional prime minister on Wednesday, told Reuters in an exclusive interview that under his leadership, the Kurdistan Regional Government's focus would be to establish a "strong and constructive" relationship with Baghdad, leaving the question of independence aside for now.

"This (independence referendum) happened in the past and it's a reflection of the enduring aspiration of a nation," said Barzani, speaking at his palace in the hillside village of Salaheddine, near regional capital Irbil.

"However, the focus of my government will be how to build a stronger relationship and partnership with Baghdad," he said, adding he would look to fix "those issues that were actually keeping us apart."

The independence bid was led by Barzani's father Masoud, who stepped down as Kurdish president in 2017 after the referendum backfired and prompted a military offensive from Baghdad.

At stake for the new premier are long-running disputes over independent oil exports, revenue sharing, security, and territory which have plagued ties between Irbil and Baghdad since a US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Barzani was instrumental in orchestrating the September 2017 referendum, which was held over the objections of Baghdad and regional powers. It was seen as the culmination of years of oppositional politics by the semi-autonomous region.

The backlash was swift and pushed the country to the brink of civil war, threatening to undo the years of unprecedented autonomy the region had enjoyed. Relations eventually improved, cemented by a change of government in both capitals.

A 'win-win situation'

The region's oil exports have long been a source of contention with Baghdad. The Kurds, who control Iraq's only northern pipeline, had been exporting oil independently since 2013. Exports were restarted in 2018, after a year-long freeze amid post-referendum disputes.

As part of the 2018 and 2019 budgets, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) agreed to send 250,000 barrels per day (bpd) to federal authorities in exchange for Baghdad paying civil servants' salaries.

However, Iraqi officials, including the prime minister, complain that the KRG has not kept up its end of the bargain, having not sent a single barrel to Baghdad.

Barzani said negotiations on oil and gas were already underway and he sees room for "quick progress" on the file.

FASTFACT

At stake for the new premier are long-running disputes over independent oil exports, revenue sharing, security, and territory which have plagued ties between Irbil and Baghdad since a US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

"There is great potential for a win-win situation," he said. "Working together in cooperation with each other, we can increase the production of oil." Mutual benefits for both sides is a theme Barzani echoed regarding regional security.

Nearly two years since Iraq declared victory against Daesh militants, the country has seen a deterioration in security in the areas bordering the Kurdistan Region.

Barzani, formerly the region's security chief, said the threat from Daesh is not yet over.

The group exploited the rift between the Kurds and Baghdad, he said, who fought side by side to defeat the militant group in 2017.

He is looking to establish a joint security mechanism in the so-called disputed territories, areas claimed by both Baghdad and Irbil, "to close that gap."

Masrouf is the latest Barzani to head the regional government. His father Masoud, himself the son of a veteran Kurdish leader, still holds considerable sway over its politics.

His cousin Nechirvan held the premiership until last month when he was sworn in as president, following a regional parliamentary election in September 2018.

Barzani said winning back hearts and minds was a leading priority, as was tackling graft.

The Barzanis are one of two families that have dominated regional politics for decades.

Though they enjoy continued support among their respective bases through extensive patronage networks, their continued grip on power has opened them up to allegations of mismanagement and corruption from voters, many of whom are owed years of back pay from the government.

“I’d like to see reform,” he said. “To make sure that people have more trust in the government.”



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Iraqi Kurdistan gets new cabinet, without oil minister
Iraqi Kurdistan names president's cousin as their new PM

Israeli settlers take over east Jerusalem home after court battle

Author:

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JERUSALEM: Palestinian family was evicted from a home in east Jerusalem near the Old City on Wednesday after Israeli settlers won a court battle that stretched more than two decades, activists said.

The apartment in the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan was home to a 53-year-old woman and her four children, according to Israeli NGO Peace Now, which opposes Israeli settlement expansion.

Police arrived and evicted the residents from the apartment and they will at least temporarily stay with relatives.

An Israeli court found that the Elad foundation, which seeks to increase the Jewish presence in mainly Palestinian east Jerusalem, had legally purchased that portion of the property and ruled in its favor.

"To take us from the house is like taking my heart from my body," one of the Palestinian residents, Ali Siyam, 20, told AFP.

Elad said in a statement "the property was purchased by Jewish people in accordance with the law, in good faith and in a fair and legal transaction." It added that "three separate courts verified that the property was lawfully purchased by Jews."

The foundation, known in English as the City of David foundation, also oversees a nearby archaeological center in Silwan that seeks to demonstrate Jews' historical connection to Jerusalem.

It was in the news recently when US officials attended an inauguration of an archaeological project it organized in Silwan, another break with traditional diplomatic practice by President Donald Trump's White House that drew Palestinian outrage.

Their attendance was seen as further US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over east Jerusalem.

Palestinians say Israel and groups such as Elad are on a systematic campaign to force them out of Jerusalem.

Israel occupied east Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed it in a move never recognized by the international community.

It sees the entire city as its capital, while the Palestinians view the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

East Jerusalem includes highly sensitive holy sites for Christians, Muslims and Jews that are located in the Old City near Silwan.

Some 600,000 Israeli settlers now live in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem among around 2.9 million Palestinians.

Peace Now said in a statement "the settlement in Silwan not only harms the prospects for a conflict-ending agreement and stability in Jerusalem, it is also cruel and evil."

It accused the settlers of "using their power and money to exhaust and

impoverish the Palestinian families in legal proceedings so that they will have to agree to sell them homes.”



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[New chemical weapons team to launch first Syria investigations](#)

Author:

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THE HAGUE: A new team established by the global chemical weapons watchdog to attribute blame for the use of banned munitions in Syria will investigate nine alleged attacks during the country's civil war, including in the town of Douma, sources briefed on the matter told Reuters.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was created in 1997 as a technical body to enforce a global non-proliferation treaty. It had until now only been authorized to say whether chemical attacks occurred, not who perpetrated them.

Last June, the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) was established by the OPCW's member states during a special session, a move that has brought deeper political division to the UN -back agency. Now it has identified the locations of its first investigations to be conducted in the coming three years.

The British-led proposal creating the 10-member team was supported by the United States and European Union, but opposed by Russia, Iran, Syria and their allies. Syria has refused to issue visas to the team's members or to provide it with documentation, OPCW chief Fernando Arias said in comments to member states published last month.

There were reports of dozens of fatalities on April 7, 2018, after an attack on Douma, at the time held by rebels but besieged by pro-government forces. US President Donald Trump blamed the attack on Syrian forces and launched missile strikes on Syrian government targets a week later with the backing of France and Britain.

The government of Syrian President Bashar Assad and its military backer Russia deny using chemical weapons and accuse insurgents of staging the attack to implicate Syrian forces.

SARIN, CHLORINE

A Russian representative to the OPCW in The Hague did not respond to requests seeking comment.

Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013, agreeing to open itself up to OPCW inspections and averting threatened military action by then US President Barack Obama.

As part of a deal brokered with Russia, Damascus vowed to completely destroy its chemical weapons capabilities, but attacks with banned munitions have been widespread and systematic during the civil war, which began in 2011. A United Nations-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) carried out the task of assigning blame for chemical weapons attacks, but Russia vetoed a resolution to extend its mandate beyond November 2017.

The new team at the OPCW is focusing on sites of chemical attacks where culprits have not yet been identified by the JIM, dating back as far back as 2015.

The JIM concluded in a series of reports since then that the Syrian military used both nerve agent sarin and chlorine as weapons, while Daesh insurgents used sulfur mustard gas on the battlefield.

The OPCW concluded in a March 1 report that a chemical weapons attack occurred in Douma, most likely with chlorine. It did not assign blame.

As of this year, Syria had not fully disclosed its chemical weapons program or explained why inspectors have continued to find traces of prohibited nerve agents or their chemical precursors at multiple locations.

Syria has acknowledged, after more than five years, that it carried out research and development activities on nerve agents it has never admitted having.

"This adds to the growing evidence of deliberately false declarations by Syria, destruction of possible evidence, and the alarming likelihood that Syria continues to possess" banned chemical agents, Canada's ambassador to the OPCW, Sabine Nolke, told delegates attending meetings at the OPCW in The Hague this week.

"Continued possession of these chemicals by Syria lends additional credence to existing allegations of their use by the regime," she said.



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Top watchdog voices concerns over Syria's chemical weaponsUN and Syria
'close' to agreeing constitutional committee