

Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq 'placed on high alert'

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Iraqi armed groups backed by Iran have been placed on high alert to respond to any action by the US amid growing tension between Tehran and Washington, their commanders told Arab News on Thursday.

Iran has trained and equipped dozens of Shiite, Sunni and Christian armed factions in Iraq.

Most operate under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a government body established in 2014 to cover forces who fought Daesh alongside the government, but they are not subject to the orders of the commander-in-chief of the Iraqi armed forces.

The US deployed an aircraft carrier battle group and other military forces to the Middle East this week in response to what Washington said was an "escalated threat" from Iran.

However, commanders of several prominent Shiite armed factions told Arab News they had received no orders to target US troops or facilities inside Iraq, and their orders were "to be fully prepared and to exercise utmost restraint."

HIGHLIGHTS

- Iran has trained and equipped dozens of Shiite, Sunni and Christian armed factions in Iraq.
- The US deployed an aircraft carrier battle group and other military forces to the Middle East this week in response to an 'escalated threat.'
- Restraining the pro-Iranian armed groups and keeping them away from American personnel and facilities is one of the greatest challenges facing the Iraqi government and Iraqi leaders.

"The resistance factions are ready at the same level for both options, peace and war," one leader said. "We are fully ready and waiting to see what will happen. The interests of Iraq will decide our next direction."

A commander in the Badr Organization, the largest pro-Iranian Shiite armed faction, told Arab News no orders had been issued by Iran to target US interests in Iraq, but they had been told to "be ready and await instructions."

Greatest challenge

Restraining the pro-Iranian armed groups and keeping them away from American personnel and facilities is one of the greatest challenges facing the Iraqi government and Iraqi leaders.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Baghdad on Tuesday for an unannounced four-hour visit. He met President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi “to obtain assurances that the Iraqi government can curb these factions and cut any financial supplies to Iran through Iraq,” a US adviser in Baghdad told Arab News

“The targeting of the US embassy in Baghdad, or any other US target inside or outside Iraq, by these factions would be considered a declaration of war between Iran and US,” the adviser said.

“So the situation depends on the efforts of the president and prime minister to curb these factions, with the help of Iran.”

The US Republican senator Marco Rubio said on Thursday: “If they attack our 50,000 US personnel and our facilities in Iraq, it should be considered no different than a direct attack by Iran.”

The US is thought to be most concerned about Kata’ib Hezbollah-Iraq and Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haq, the most hostile anti-American Shiite armed factions, who carried out deadly attacks against US troops in Iraq from 2007 to 2011.

However, a senior Kata’ib Hezbollah-Iraq commander told Arab News they would not attack any US target if the US did not use Iraqi territory to attack Iran.

“Shiite resistance, especially Kata’ib and Asa’ib, have always been at the forefront of supporters of the Iraqi government ... and avoided embarrassing it in many previous situations, so we would not do this now,” he said.

“But if the Americans use Iraqi territory to strike Muslims in the Islamic Republic of Iran, we will respond, as it would be our ideological duty. In that case, we would not be alone and all the factions of the PMU would join us.”



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Lebanon students get classes in surviving war and disasters

Author:

Thu, 2019-05-09 21:49

TRIPOLI: For students at Takmiliyat Al Kobba 2nd School in Tripoli in northern Lebanon, getting an education used to mean risking their lives in a hail of bullets.

Pupils would dash down the exposed steps at the school, which was caught on the boundary between two warring sects, hoping to reach safety. But not all made it.

Mekdad Dergham, 8, was killed as he left the school in 2010.

"This child, for his bad luck, he was going back downstairs to go home and unfortunately he didn't arrive. The bullet was faster than him," school director Raghida Abdel El Hamid Chamsin told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, speaking from her office.

"I still remember he was in the third grade. Every year, I would say, 'If he was still alive he would be in fourth grade,' next year I would say 'He should be in the fifth grade'."

Now the school is working with the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) to train children on how to stay safe during conflicts and disasters.

Around the world, people facing multiple threats, from worsening storms to violent uprisings, often are helped to deal with just one at a time, leaving them still vulnerable to others, researchers say.

But joining up preparedness efforts – as is happening in Lebanon – can save both cash and lives, they say.

In Lebanon, the war in neighboring Syria that erupted in 2011, with opposition fighters battling to topple Bashar Assad, triggered Lebanon's worst instability since its own 1975-90 civil war.

This included several bouts of fighting in Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city and a historic base for fighter groups, that left hundreds dead and injured.

But as well as struggling to cope with conflict, Lebanon's 6 million people also face natural hazards: The country is crossed by three major earthquake fault lines and is at risk of flooding, landslides, wildfires and storms.

Increasing resilience

Recent years have seen growing efforts to increase the country's ability to cope with disasters.

A decade ago the prime minister's office established a national disaster risk management unit, supported by the UN Development Program.

This aims to "support the Lebanese government in its efforts to reduce exposure and vulnerabilities in order to reduce the risk of disasters," a government spokesman said in an email.

A Lebanon Crisis Response Plan was developed in 2017 with the support of international partners, aiming to protecting the most vulnerable and support stability in the fall-out from the Syria crisis.

Much of the national disaster risk management work focuses on raising awareness of hazards and increasing collaboration within a heavily sectarian society.

But schools have also been a focal point, with the government helping to develop educational materials such as a board game targeting children aged 9-15 called "If you don't know, it's a disaster."

The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction has long argued that children should be offered disaster training, as they are among the most vulnerable in a crisis and schools often act as focal points for wider communities.

"It is very important to safeguard our future generations and ... to enhance a culture of prevention and awareness," said the government spokesman.

Regular drills

Although fighting has died down in Tripoli in recent years, mock gunfire still rings out at Takmiliyat Al-Kobba 2nd School and about 200 other government schools during regular drills run by the Lebanese Red Cross.

During a recent armed conflict drill, students quickly evacuated their classrooms and took shelter in the school's theater.

"I feel afraid," 14-year-old Amal Ibrahim said after the practice. "But when I think of the steps I should do, I feel less frightened because I know how to protect myself."

Students' relatives are invited to learn about the drills – not least because otherwise they might risk their own lives by coming to school to try to save their children in a disaster, said Kassem Chaalan, an LRC project manager.

"In studies we did, a number of the deaths and injuries were either caused by attempts to escape or to rescue others," said Chaalan.

The school training is also seen an opportunity to increase disaster resilience within wider communities. “You can create this culture among children at schools, and then they will be able to transfer this culture to their families,” said Chaalan.

The school training includes information on how to recognize a disaster, where to shelter, when and where to evacuate, as well as the basics of first aid and firefighting.

“When we used to hear (the) sound of bullets, we used to be too scared to know what to do. It was so confusing,” said Houssam Khaddooj, an 18-year-old former student who now volunteers with the LRC on the drills.

“If this had happened before, the area would have coped better. We would have been able to take care of ourselves, to raise awareness among those who are younger than us.”



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Gold laden private plane seized in Sudan

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KHARTOUM: Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) seized a private plane that attempted to smuggle a large amount of gold on Thursday, the RSF's Facebook page reported.

The plane, that belonged to a foreign company, was seized by the RSF in Sudan's River Nile state, the forces said.

The aircraft was due to land at Khartoum International Airport within the next few hours, according to the RSF.

The RSF grew out of the government-backed Janjaweed militia and is headed by Lt Gen Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo.







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stint in reshuffled Jordanian government

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AMMAN: Jordanian Prime Minister Omar Razzaz's newly reshuffled government was on Thursday sworn in before the country's King Abdullah.

The reorganization was marked by the appointment of political hardliner Salameh Hammad as the new minister of interior replacing the outgoing Samir Mubaideen.

It is the third time Hammad has held the interior ministerial post, his first stint being between 1993 and 1996, and his second in 2015 during the administration of Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour.

In April 2016 Ensour was forced to ask for Hammad's resignation after a large number of parliamentary members signed a petition expressing no confidence in him.

Haytham Erefej, a founding member of the Civil Coalition party, told Arab News that the government rejig will make things more difficult.

"This is a strange reshuffle, normally there is a goal behind the change, for example to lessen tension in the street, but this change will make the public angrier than before and this is in total contradiction to Prime Minister Omar Razzaz who was brought in as a liberal savior," said Erefej.

Sabri Rbehat, a former Jordanian minister, questioned the need for change. "It produces no advancement in the badly needed political process," Rbehat told Amman's Radio Al-Balad.

Abla Abu Elba, secretary-general of the left-wing Hashd party, said: "Even though we don't want to be pessimistic, the message in the appointment (of Hammad) signals that we will be facing a harsh position in the future."

Jordan MP Tariq Khoury told Arab News he was opposed to appointing government Cabinet members based on a quota system rather than qualifications. "We need to end this idea of making appointments based on geography or tribalism but on qualifications," he said.

Ali Khawaldeh, director general of the Jordanian Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs, told Arab News he welcomed some of the changes particularly the renaming of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs to the Ministry of Local Government. He said the new name was in accordance with "international norms" and that it will "strengthen the current decentralization efforts."

The country's Ministry of Telecommunications will now be called the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship with Mothana Gharabia continuing to head up the ministerial role.

Razzaz had asked on May 8 for all his ministers to resign ahead of the third reshuffle in the space of a year. It follows a change of personnel in the general intelligence directorate and at the royal court.

Bisher Al-Khasawneh was appointed as adviser to his majesty for communication and coordination as of April 23, 2019, and Maj. Gen. Ahmad Husni was appointed as director of the General Intelligence Department (GID) as of May 1.



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Jordanian Cabinet resigns ahead of government reshuffle
Jordanian mayor apologizes for helping Israeli tourists

El-Sisi and Haftar discuss Egyptian support for Libyan National Army

Thu, 2019-05-09 17:44

CAIRO: Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi discussed Egypt's support for the Libyan National Army (LNA) with its commander Khalifa Haftar on Thursday.

El-Sisi confirmed Egypt's support for efforts to counter terrorism and militias in order to achieve safety and stability in Libya, a presidential spokesman said.

Last month, Haftar's forces, which are loyal to the administration based in Eastern Libya, launched an offensive against the capital Tripoli which is held by a rival government.

The country has been divided since the downfall of Muammar Qaddafi, and Egypt has supported Haftar as a bulwark against extremist forces in Libya.

During Thursday's meeting at the Ittihadiya presidential palace, Haftar explained Libyan efforts to address foreign interference in the country, which he said aims to smuggle weapons, fighters and foreign terrorists into Libya. Haftar has accused Turkey and Libya of backing hardline militias in the country.

Earlier, the head of Libya's Tripoli-based government met British Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt in London.

Fayez Al-Sarraj, whose government is backed by the UN, has been in Europe this week seeking support against Haftar's Tripoli offensive.

Haftar's Libyan National Army launched an assault on Tripoli on April 4, setting off another deadly escalation in a country mired in violence since Qaddafi's death after an Arab Spring uprising in 2011.

Britain has pushed for a resolution at the UN Security Council demanding a ceasefire in Libya but its efforts have foundered amid divisions at the world body.



Meanwhile, three people were killed Thursday in a suspected hit-and-run attack by Daesh militants on a town in southern Libya, residents and a military official said, the second such attack within days.

Gunmen stormed the southern town of Ghadwa and opened fire before retreating back into the desert, residents said.

The attack came after nine soldiers were killed on Saturday in an attack claimed by Daesh on a training camp for Haftar's forces.

In Tripoli, three rockets hit a western suburb overnight close to the heavily fortified UN compound but otherwise there was less fighting than last week as life slowed down with the start of the holy month of Ramadan.



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attack on Haftar camp in south Libya kills 9 soldiers