

Pompeo: US relationship with Saudi Arabia essential for Middle East stability

Sat, 2019-01-12 15:15

LONDON: The United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia is essential to the Middle East's stability and security, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Saturday.

The US secretary of state told Al Arabiya that America wants an Arab coalition and force that is capable of facing the different challenges in the region. He added that the US will not be leaving the Middle East, and that destroying Daesh is a priority.

Pompeo is on a whistlestop regional tour aimed at reassuring US allies after President Donald Trump's shock decision to withdraw all US troops from Syria. He was in Abu Dhabi on Saturday after a visit to Bahrain on Friday.

He told Al Arabiya that the US withdrawal from Syria does not contradict its strategy towards Iran, and nor does it mean a retreat with regards to fighting terrorism.

The Iranian people should know that interfering in the affairs of other states is "unacceptable," and the US wants to hear the voice of the Iranian people, Pompeo said.

The US top diplomat has also visited Cairo, Amman, Baghdad, and the Iraqi Kurdish regional capital of Irbil.

The United States plans to jointly host a global summit focused on the Middle East, particularly Iran, next month in Poland, the US State Department said on Friday. The gathering will take place in Warsaw from Feb. 13 to Feb. 14, it said in a statement.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Fox News in an interview on Friday that the meeting would "focus on Middle East stability and peace and freedom and security here in this region, and that includes an important element of making sure that Iran is not a destabilizing influence."

Pompeo said that a number of matters would be discussed at the summit, the most important of which would be Iran.







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Pompeo in Bahrain on first leg of tour of Gulf allies
Pompeo praises Egypt 'freedoms' during church and mosque visit

[Palestinians mourn woman killed by Israeli fire at protest](#)

Author:

AP

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1547294244907569800

Sat, 2019-01-12 (All day)

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip: Hundreds of Palestinians have gathered for the funeral of a woman killed by Israeli forces at a protest near the perimeter fence, this year's first fatality from the weekly mass demonstrations. Amal Al-Taramsi, a 43-year-old activist who had regularly attended the protests, was buried Saturday after being shot the day before.

Of the 186 Palestinians killed since the protests were launched last spring, only three were women. A 21-year-old medic and a 14-year-old girl were killed last year.

Gaza's Hamas rulers have orchestrated the protests, in part to call for the lifting of a crippling decade-long Israeli and Egyptian blockade.

The demonstrations draw Palestinians of all ages, but it is usually young men who approach the fence, often hurling rocks and firebombs at Israeli forces on the other side.



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Gaza's fatal ritual: Endless protests, mounting casualties Hamas and Israel halt fire over Gaza after Egyptian mediation

[Explosion sparks fire at Aden refinery in Yemen](#)

Author:

AFP

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Fri, 2019-01-11 20:04

ADEN: A fire that ripped through a storage tank at the main oil refinery in Yemen's Aden on Friday evening was probably started deliberately, an official said.

The fire, which also spread to a nearby pipeline, was likely "the result of an explosion (and) probably a deliberate act of sabotage," said the official, who did not wish to be named.

He did not specify who may have been responsible.

"The fire brigade are working to contain the blaze and stop it spreading to the neighboring storage tanks, which are full of oil and diesel" donated by Saudi Arabia, he added.

Another official said security forces had prevented anyone from leaving the site and opened an investigation into the incident.

Early indications suggested "an explosion and an act of sabotage" were to blame, he said.

Yemen's government took up residence in the southern port city of Aden after Houthi rebels ousted it from the capital Sanaa in 2014.

Aden's refinery was damaged in fighting the following year between government and Houthi forces which put it out of operation for more than a year, causing severe fuel shortages and power cuts.

Yemen produced a relatively small amount of oil before its war.



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Houthi drone control center destroyed in Yemen as US condemns Lahaj attack
UN 'alarmed' over renewed Yemen violence after drone attack

[Turkey vows operation against Kurdish militia, when time is right](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-01-11 23:30

ISTANBUL: Turkey's defense minister on Friday pledged to wage a campaign against a US-backed Syrian Kurdish militia, sharpening focus on a potential conflict the US has sought to prevent.

The comments from Hulusi Akar, on an unannounced visit to inspect troops stationed near the Syrian border directly opposite territory held by the US-backed Kurdish YPG, appeared to be aimed at both Washington and its Kurdish allies.

Turkey and the US, although NATO allies, are deeply divided over the implementation of President Donald Trump's plan to bring home about 2,000 troops stationed in Syria. The plan hinges on Turkish cooperation to secure a swathe of northeast Syria as the US departs.

While the pull-out has been clouded by mixed messages from both Trump and his administration, on Friday the US-led coalition against Daesh began the process of withdrawing, a spokesman said.

Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, this week tried to make the case for guarantees that Turkey would not harm the YPG after the withdrawal. That earned a stiff rebuke from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Turkey considers the YPG a terrorist organization and sees Washington's support for it against Daesh as a betrayal.

"When the time and place comes the terrorists here will be buried in the ditches they have dug, as was done in previous operations," Akar said in a speech to military personnel at a brigade command center in the province of Sanliurfa, referring to two other cross-border campaigns that Turkey has carried out in Syria.

Turkey views the YPG as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a three-decade insurgency in Turkey's largely Kurdish southeast. The Kurdish groups that control a vast swathe of northern Syria

have now turned to Moscow and Damascus in the hope of striking a political deal that will stave off Turkey and shield their autonomy in the north.

Ankara has repeatedly expressed frustration over a deal with the US for the withdrawal of the YPG from the city of Manbij, just west of the Euphrates River.

“Before us we have Manbij on one side and the east of the Euphrates on the other,” Akar said, underscoring the scale of a potential operation. “Important preparations and planning have been made in connection with this. Our preparations are continuing intensively.”

Turkey’s planned military operation against a Kurdish militia in Syria does not depend on an American withdrawal from the region, Ankara said on Thursday.



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Turkey cannot accept Bolton’s comments on Kurdish fighters: Erdogan
Turkey bolsters troops in Kurdish areas of northern Syria: war monitor

A battle of nerves for the control of Idlib city

Fri, 2019-01-11 23:25

BEIRUT: The Idlib area in northern Syria is now fully ruled by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a militant organization dominated by members of Al-Qaeda's former affiliate.

Some of the other factions in the region are already allies, the others will either have to leave to other areas or be absorbed into the so-called Salvation Government run by the HTS.

How was this de-facto "emirate" allowed to consolidate and what consequences could it have for the nearly eight-year-old Syrian conflict and its main protagonists?

A deal was struck between opposition-backer Turkey and Damascus ally Russia in September to stave off a threatened government offensive on Idlib.

It has successfully prevented a massive Russian-backed regime assault on an area that is home to around 3 million people but its terms have remained unfulfilled.

Moscow had tasked Turkey, whose proxies fell under an umbrella known as the National Liberation Front (NLF), with disarming hard-line factions in Idlib.

It failed to do so and it was HTS that went on the offensive instead.

NUMBER

3.6m

Syria refugees have been provided shelter in Turkey.

They made rapid gains and intense clashes that left more than 130 dead this year, which led to a deal on Thursday that saw the two Turkish-backed remaining factions stand down, capping the militants' clean sweep.

Turkey, which has troops deployed in parts of Idlib and elsewhere in northern Syria, appeared to do little to stop HTS' expansion.

"Turkey didn't prevent HTS' takeover, but it's not obvious that it was in a position to do so," said Sam Heller, an analyst with the International Crisis

Group.

HTS has an estimated 25,000 seasoned and well-armed fighters in its bastion, and has long been the dominant force in Idlib.

The militants' lightning advance across Idlib earlier this year mark an unequivocal defeat for several outfits that were directly supported by Turkey.

"For Turkey, it's the defeat of its allies," said Fabrice Balanche, a Syria expert and geographer.

Two factions in the Turkey-backed NLF that had been battling HTS stood down and signed the deal on Thursday which essentially sees them absorbed.

Ahrar Al-Sham and Suqur Al-Sham said they were keeping some of their forces in the Idlib area for now, but they will fall under the newly expanded administration of the Salvation Government.

Just like the forces from the Nureddine Al-Zinki group that HTS defeated last week, the rebels who reject militant rule will most likely relocate to other Turkish-controlled areas such as Afrin.

Turkey has been training and equipping Syrian proxies to use against the Kurdish militia that controls the northeast of the country.

They have threatened a cross-border assault against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), but the main deterrent has been the presence of a US-led coalition.

The troop pullout announced by US President Donald Trump last month, and which the coalition confirmed on Friday was under way, could clear the way for a Turkish offensive.

HTS' takeover of Idlib means the terms of a deal reached in the Russian resort of Sochi on Sept. 17 have not been respected.

After the agreement with Damascus sponsor Russia, Turkey was tasked with using its proxies in Idlib to rein in militants.

The Sochi deal froze a threatened Russian-backed government offensive which had seemed imminent four months ago.

An onslaught on the area would have caused an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe.

Turkey, which already provides shelter to 3.6 million Syria refugees, is keen to avoid a fresh round of violence that could spark another wave of displacement.

The HTS takeover revives the threat of a Syrian offensive but Balanche predicted it might not be the regime's priority.

“The Russians are ready to attack at any moment but they won’t do it,” he said.

“They are using (Turkish President Recep Tayyip) Erdogan to put pressure on the Americans to leave northeastern Syria,” he said.

Turkey on Thursday reacted angrily to the mixed messages the US administration has been sending about the pace of the troop withdrawal, and warned that any further delay would prompt it to trigger its invasion.



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Cease-fire deal sees extremists take over Syria’s Idlib
Idlib clashes stir debate over de-escalation deal